

Sermon for the Fourth Sunday after Epiphany      February 1, 2009  
 Delivered by the Rev. Margaret Bullitt-Jonas  
 Grace Church, Amherst, MA

Deuteronomy 18:15-20  
 Psalm 111

1 Corinthians 8:1-13  
 Mark 1:21-28

### "As One Having Authority"

I have to tell you, I wrestled with this Gospel. How does it connect with us? How does it speak to the issues that are on our minds this morning, from our personal relationships to the economic meltdown and the struggle of Israelis and Palestinians to learn to co-exist? What does this brief scene of Jesus teaching in the synagogue and releasing a man from an unclean spirit have to say to us today? I found myself walking around, repeating the opening line of today's Gospel as I pondered the story: "Jesus and his disciples went to Capernaum" -- "Jesus went to Capernaum" -- "So Jesus walks to Capernaum" -- and before long I found myself saying, "So a man walks into a bar..."

I laughed. Well, I thought, laughter is a good thing. Laughter breaks open the mind. And I think that is the point of the story: when we find ourselves in Christ's presence, our minds break open. We awaken. We see the world with new eyes. We understand afresh, as the poet says, that "the world is charged with the grandeur of God."

So let's take a look at the passage. It comes immediately after the one we heard last week about Jesus calling his first disciples. We are at the very beginning of Jesus' public ministry, and the first thing he does is to go into a synagogue on the Sabbath and begin to teach. As far as Mark's Gospel is concerned, teaching was vital to Jesus' ministry, but it is interesting that Mark says nothing in this passage about *what* Jesus taught.<sup>1</sup> In fact, throughout his Gospel, Mark has comparatively little to say about the content of Jesus' teaching. The other Gospel writers are eager to preserve it -- think, for instance, of Jesus' long discourses, such as the Sermon on the Mount, in the Gospel of Matthew, or Jesus' long discourses on light and darkness, life and death, good and evil, in the Gospel of John. For the other Gospel writers, knowing the content of Jesus' teaching is essential to the Christian life.

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<sup>1</sup> D.E. Nineham, *The Gospel of Saint Mark*, Penguin Books: Middlesex, England, 1963, 1969.

By contrast, Mark focuses less on *what* Jesus taught and more on its power, its effect. The text tells us that everyone was “astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes” [Mark 1:22]. Who were the scribes? In Jesus’ time they were the men who interpreted the Scriptures. They examined precedent; they quoted tradition; they repeated other people’s ideas about God. Unlike the scribes, Jesus taught “as one having authority.” One way to explain his authority is to believe that Jesus was more educated than the scribes, and some scholars argue that Jesus was trained and ordained as a rabbi. “Properly ordained rabbis with full rabbinic authority” seldom traveled into Galilee, so maybe the people of Galilee were astonished to hear someone who had that authority, or who spoke as if he had.<sup>2</sup>

But whether or not Jesus spoke as a rabbi -- and the evidence is inconclusive -- Jesus’ authority obviously springs from a source more significant than that. When Jesus speaks, he speaks with the authority of God. When Jesus teaches, he conveys -- through his presence and gestures and words -- the very presence and power of God. Jesus is not just imparting information. He is not just passing along something that he read in a book. He is not just giving second-hand ideas, however interesting they may be. No -- when he stands before us in the synagogue, he is lit up with God. He is inviting us not to think about God or talk about God, but to experience God. Jesus is a teacher who wants not just to put new ideas in our minds, but to transform our minds, not just to fill up our consciousness but to enlarge it, to break it open, so that we can meet the God who makes all things new.

Jesus does this with power. And Mark is quick to show that this power is a healing power, a power that sets us free. “Just then,” says Mark, “there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit,” and the story of Jesus healing the man with an unclean spirit is quickly followed by the story of his healing Peter’s mother-in-law [Mk 1:29-34], and of his healing a leper [Mk 1:40-45], stories that we will hear over the next two Sundays.

Healing is what happens when we come into the presence of God. The healing may take place very gently, as when a leper’s skin is quietly restored, or it may take place with a great struggle, as in today’s scene in the synagogue, when the unclean spirit cries out to Jesus, and Jesus loudly rebukes it, and the unclean spirit comes out of the man, “convulsing him and crying with a loud voice” [Mk 1:26]. I wonder if the man’s external, bodily tossing to and fro as the spirit comes out of him expresses how attached the man is to that “unclean”

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., pp. 74-75.

spirit, and how fierce his inner battle to relinquish it. Sometimes we don't quite want to let those spirits go.

What is an unclean spirit? A spirit that stands in opposition to what is holy. We are never told what kind of unclean spirit possesses the man in today's story, but we don't have to assume that the man is crazy or that he is possessed by a demon in some kind of unusual or spectacular way.<sup>3</sup> He may be just an ordinary fellow who is profoundly alienated from himself and from God. His "unclean spirit" may simply be the force of habit in his mind, the fact that he shows up in the synagogue and clings to the routine, the verbal formulas, the soothing liturgies, and thinks of them as something to worship in themselves. Maybe he likes conventional religion because it is predictable and safe, the "opiate of the people," as Karl Marx would say, and maybe his spirit is "unclean" only because he has never experienced for himself the wild Mystery of God that is beyond our mental constructs, our images and ideas. When Jesus enters the synagogue and begins to speak with authority -- not as the scribes do, but full on, with the very power of God -- the man shouts at Jesus. He recognizes who Jesus is, the "holy One of God," but he wants that guy out of here. "Go back to the wilderness where you came from and be a holy man out there! Don't go bringing your living God right here into this sacred place where I've got everything all figured out!"

Or maybe the man has another kind of unclean spirit, the kind that whispers in our ears: "You're not good enough. Try as hard as you like, but you're never going to amount to much. You are lazy, you are fat, you are too thin, you are old, you are too young, you are stupid, you are a loser." Oh, the mean things those toxic, contemptuous voices like to say! They alienate us from ourselves and they alienate us from God. They are the killing voices of shame and self-doubt.

Is that the kind of unclean spirit that is troubling you? Or is it something else? Maybe it is a spirit of fear, a spirit of worry and anxiety. There is a lot of that going around these days. Maybe it is a spirit of bitterness and resentment, a spirit that refuses to seek forgiveness or to make amends, a spirit that closes you down. How insidious and tenacious those spirits can be!

Christ wants to open us to a larger, divine reality that is always available but that we don't always see. He wants us to let go those unclean spirits, those habitual and sometimes toxic ways of perceiving and making sense of things,

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<sup>3</sup> John P. Keenan, *The Gospel of Mark: A Mahayana Reading*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995, pp. 67-72. This is a fascinating, provocative, and, as far as I can tell, quite original exploration of Mark's Gospel from a Buddhist perspective.

and to fall silent so that we can listen and look, and discover at last his presence within us and around us. He wants to set us free.

One morning last month it started to snow -- no surprise -- and by sunset we had a good twelve inches. At 9 o'clock that night I went outside in the dark with a shovel, and my husband and I began digging out the driveway. After a while, Jonas went inside, but I felt like being outdoors, so I stayed in the cold dark air, and I reached and lifted and hurled, again and again, as I slowly cleared the snow away.

Finally I stopped, breathing hard, to lean on my shovel and to look around: deep gray sky, white rooftops, street lamps shining, the muffled sound of a plow scraping in the distance. With one set of eyes, it was another boring night on Bancroft Road, the weary world repeating itself endlessly. Seeing through those eyes, I felt impatient and irritable. What was the point of anything? Everything was useless, empty, and unsatisfying.

But then -- I don't know why -- suddenly I was seeing through another set of eyes, and everything I saw was dear to me: the stark grey sky, the shining snow, the house across the street. All of it was just the same as it always is and all of it was lovely, however imperfect or haphazard it might be. I loved everything I saw. I don't know whether the love in my eyes made everything lovable, or whether my loving eyes saw through the surface of things and glimpsed the Love that was already within them and that would be visible every day, if only I had eyes to see.

I felt peaceful and full of joy, as if an angel's wing had brushed my cheek, as if the Holy Spirit had overshadowed me, as if Jesus himself had just walked into the synagogue and begun teaching with authority, and my unclean spirit had melted away like snow.

I don't know about you, but it seems to me that the main thing is not just to save the world, not just to rescue the economy, and to stop global warming, and to stop the war in Iraq, and to help the Israelis and Palestinians make peace, and to do all the other good and necessary things that we urgently need to do. What matters even more, I think, is that we save a way of seeing the world, that we continue to see the world with loving eyes -- because if we do that, then what we see becomes worth saving. It becomes worth loving, worth treating kindly and with respect. I think that's what it looks like when we stand in our authority in Christ, the place where we see ourselves and each other and all creation with loving eyes, and Christ makes all things new.