

Christ Church, Valdosta, Georgia

Epiphany 4, January 31, 2021

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I love the Gospel of Mark. It reads fast and quickly and is packed with rich imagery and meaning. The word “immediately” is used 73 times in the Gospel. Mark cuts from one scene to the next, giving us the bare bones ... this is what you need to know about Jesus when such-and-such happened ... next event. Mark’s words are few, but important.

Last week in Mark, Jesus began his earthly ministry by calling four disciples. They immediately dropped everything and followed him. The four follow him to the village of Capernaum on the northwest shore of Galilee. It is there at the Temple where two important things happen and together, they explicitly define who Jesus is. First, Jesus began to teach. Often synagogue leaders invited others to teach on certain days. Jesus goes into the Temple, sits down, and begins to teach. This is the first event and it emphasizes the way and manner that he teaches. People are simply amazed. In the minds of the hearers, Jesus acts as though he is authorized by God. What he taught deeply affected those who listened. He does not teach the way the scribes do. Jesus style is one where he interprets the law and speaks on behalf of God without engaging in dialogue about traditions. Jesus speaks about newness and claims the authority to make assertions about the way things are. The description of Jesus from his hearers: “One who has authority” has great meaning. It literally means that the assigned power given to Jesus is directly from God. Jesus is the anointed one and he alone has the power to defeat Satan and all the spiritual forces of wickedness that rebel against God. This latter attribute is born out in the second event: his interaction with the man in the Temple who is possessed by an unclean spirit. Jesus sees that the man is a good man; but he is possessed by the unclean a demon or demons. The unclean spirit asks Jesus: “What are you doing here? Have you come to destroy us?” Jesus has crossed the boundaries of what has been and what the Kingdom of God now brings. Jesus rebukes the demons. He commands them: “Be quiet. Come out.” The man’s body shakes and shudders, and then howling, the spirit flies out. These two events of teaching and exorcism are both rapid and shocking. They reveal the God given power to instruct and to heal. There is compassion. Kindness. Empathy. This authority defines the work of Jesus for the Gospel of Mark – a work that even the religious people do not recognize, but the demons do. And it is the work of the Messiah as the incarnate God, to begin the rescue operation. Question: How can the world know that it is being rescued? Answer: The authority of Jesus discloses it. When he cures the sick, drives out the unclean spirits, frees the oppressed, restores the disfigured, the blind, the lame, and restores life. Jesus is proclaiming the startling, unprecedented freedom Gospel power brings to those who accept it. Jesus shows that the Kingdom of God is victorious, releasing God’s children from the dominion of evil. The Gospel for Mark is a matter of life and death.

Wow. After all that, I’m exhausted. So much happens with so few scenes and words and so quickly. But look at what is being proclaimed: God came into the world to deliver it from evil.

Let us now turn to the unfortunate man in whom the unclean spirit dwelled and seek its nuances. Regardless of how the chain of events unfolded, Jesus comes face to face with someone who needs him to make him whole. Here is a man who has been overcome with evil. I don’t know how many of you were around in 1973 when the movie, *The Exorcist*, came out with a young actress named Linda Blair. It was, and maybe still is, the scariest movie that I have ever seen. In and through cinematic horror, I saw sheer and unadulterated evil. Evil seemingly overcoming all that is good. And the priest, Father Merrin, comes on the scene, first cast in shadows. I will never forget the scene where he is standing and proclaiming: “The Power of Christ Compels You. The Power of Christ Compels You.” The little girl’s mother brings the terrible need of her child to the authority of Christ. That is the first and primary step. In order to be rescued, the one needing rescue must come to Christ and be aware of what needs rescuing. With this coming Lent, we have perfect opportunities to ask: Where am I broken? What do I consider to be the evil or evils in my life that need to be removed? What are the bonds that are keeping me from being free? These are the first steps toward a journey toward wholeness. That is what Jesus is striving for in each of us: beautiful wholeness. There are at least seven areas that define the container of human wholeness: the physical self (our bodies), the emotional self (our feelings), our mental self (the ways we think), our spiritual self (the ways we relate to and experience God), our relational self (the way

we interact with others), our financial self (the ways we manage our money and serve as the stewards of God's creation), and our vocational self (the way we utilize our gifts and live into our vocation). Perfect human beings are perfect in every one of those areas. I'm not perfect, though. There are several areas of need I know in need of rescue. Those who are most conscious of their weaknesses, most conscious of their afflictions, most aware of the pain of their powerlessness, are the ones who stand the best chance of coming to Jesus.

The teaching and the exorcism in the Temple are intimately connected. Inquiries into Jesus' authority are inquiries into his very identity. Mark is just getting warmed up here. These kinds of questions will resurface in the events of every chapter. Eventually, the question of Jesus' authority – is He really sent from God --- will figure into his death.

The season of Epiphany celebrates and considers the means by which Christ becomes visible and known. Epiphany is allowing our continued amazement by Jesus' authority to upend our assumptions about what is possible. Where can we see souls set free from destructive tendencies and powers that we were thought beyond anyone's control? Epiphany is not just about longing for and acknowledging past manifestations of Jesus' greatness and the power of the Gospel, it is about discovering what deserves our amazement in current as well as our longed-for experiences.

Allow me to end with a short story that brought my ministry face to face with the power of evil and the authorized power of Christ our Lord. When I was an interim priest at a parish in North Atlanta, a young woman asked me to come to visit her in her newly purchased two-story house and to meet her two dogs. It was her first house and I was a bit reticent, but then I thought I saw a certain fear in her eyes. I was also aware that the congregation had instantly bonded with her. And so, I agreed. When I arrived, we sat in her kitchen and she served coffee. She told me that there was a room upstairs, one of the bedrooms, that was always cold no matter what the thermostat setting. Additionally, her two dogs refused to go up the stairs to second floor altogether. Often, she detected a terrible odor emanating from that room and she searched for its origin without success. She also said that things on the second floor would seemingly appear rearranged overnight. She began to hear noises she could not explain. Now this began to progressively freak me out because I knew that this was leading to something. And then there it was, she wanted me to do an exorcism of her house. By the way, the upper room was frigid as was the second floor when I was introduced to it. It was scary.

I did an investigation of exorcisms. Truthfully, this was the first time in my ministry where I had come face to face with such a situation. In the Episcopal Church, an actual liturgy of exorcism is extremely rare and must be carefully planned and executed with the Bishop of the Diocese. Before I went in that direction, I sat down with my church leadership one day and laid it out before them. They had a brilliant idea. They said: "Fr. Jim, why don't we invite certain members of the congregation to the house and we can celebrate a house blessing like the one you recently did. We will take the processional cross, incense, and Holy Water and bless each room in succession using the Liturgy for the Blessing of a Home. Afterwards, if we see that we then need to go to the bishop, we can." It was sound advice and we did just that. Prayers for God's blessings were said in every room of that house. In the room in question, the Processional cross was placed squarely in the middle of the room. The prayers were said. The Holy Water dispersed. The incense made it a fragrant offering. (BTW: we had deactivated all the smoke detectors). When the last prayer was said and the blessing pronounced, believe it or not, what we witnessed, *immediately* (and I use the word with all the irony that Mark brings us today), was that the dogs ran up the stairs and joined us in that room wagging their tails. The young woman never mentioned any problem after the liturgy. The authority of Christ was compelling.

What happens to the evil that Jesus drives out? Mark gives no information about what happens to the spirit, which appears to become disembodied, not destroyed. Jewish literature is somewhat unique in its attention to demonic possession as opposed to demonic attacks. When Jesus strips the spirits of the ability to inhabit a human host, perhaps the Gospel's claim is that Jesus is denying the unclean spirits' capability to have a settled place or entrenched influence in the world. Losing opportunities to win over people's bodies and minds or even locations, allows the idea that such spirits lose their authority or the authority that they thought they had, it denies those kinds of forces the authority or power to hold sway over people's lives. And that is the true power of the Gospel. That is the authority of Christ. Thanks be to God!