

**Fourth Sunday in Epiphany
(Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time)**

Mark 1:21-28; Deuteronomy 18:15-20; Psalm 111; I Corinthians 8:1-13

Mark 1:21-28 is the story of Jesus' exorcism of the demoniac in the synagogue of Capernaum. As such, it is Mark's opening volley of Jesus' confrontation of the political, economic and religious systems of Israel.

This story is not simply an account of Jesus' first healing in Mark, but *Jesus' first public action*. It is an action against "the powers that be", communicated to the ruler by specifically locating that action in the synagogue of Capernaum. In order to appreciate Jesus' choice of this venue for the first public action of his ministry, one must recognize the place of the synagogue in the Jewish culture of the first century A.D.

The synagogue was one of the two primary symbols to Jews of Jewish power. Both politically and economically, Israel was under the dominance of Rome.¹ The only area of genuine freedom was in their religion where, in essence, the Romans acquiesced to Israelite religious practices (for example, refusing to worship the emperor as divinity) in order to accomplish Rome's political and economic objectives. The religious institutions of Israel were expected to cooperate in maintaining Rome's dominance of Israel², but in return for that cooperation, they were granted considerable latitude in their religious practices. Consequently, it was the religious system of Israel that was the only authentically Israelite institution that could negotiate with Rome and could protect the interests of the Jews.

Israel's religious system consisted of two institutions: the synagogue and the Temple. The Temple was centralized in Jerusalem, while the synagogues were dispersed throughout the land. Every town had its synagogue, and larger towns two or three. The synagogue system was initiated by Nehemiah around 400 BCE (Neh. 11:36) by reassigning temple priests to the towns and villages of Israel to keep faith in Yahweh alive by weekly reading and reflecting with the people on scripture and applying the Law to the ways they lived their every-day lives.³ By the time of Jesus, the synagogue and the Temple had evolved into two distinct and sometimes competitive institutions that not only managed the religious life of Israel but much of its political and economic interchange with Rome, as well. And the result was that both Temple and synagogue leaders significantly benefited both economically and politically from protecting these interests

¹ Although Rome allowed limited "home-rule" for Israel (Herod Antipas in Galilee, Philip in Trans-Jordan and the Jewish clergy aristocracy in Judah), such home-rule was permitted only to the degree that it would cooperate with the political and economic agenda of Rome. It was true that individual Israelites were free to find their own day-labor, could run farms or be private artisans, but such work was actually part of an entire Roman Empire-wide economic system that primarily benefited Rome and bled the country dry of economic resources.

² For example, Rome chose the high priest of Israel, who was the chief religious authority of the entire nation and a strategic political and economic authority for Judah, as well. And the Jewish Sanhedrin was clearly cooperative with Rome's political objectives in Israel.

³ For a thorough exploration of formation of the synagogue system, see either Linthicum, Robert, *Building A People of Power: Equipping Churches to Transform Their Communities* (Waynesboro, GA: Authentic Press, 2006), pp. 255-257 or Linthicum, Robert, "It Wasn't About the Walls: Nehemiah and the Transformation of Us All", Curriculum for Course 450 (Upland, CA: Partners in Urban Transformation, 2005), pp. 59C through p. 62.

The synagogue and Temple were two distinct institutions that made up the religious system of Israel. Besides being dispersed throughout Israel, the synagogue was the center for the study of the Jewish scriptures for first century Jews. Besides being centralized in Jerusalem, the Temple was the center for Israel's observance of its sacrificial rituals and celebration of its liturgies. Thus, the synagogue was primarily for study while the Temple was primarily for worship. The synagogue was the repository of the Law and of all of Israel's holy books. The Temple was the repository of the Ark of the Covenant⁴ and of Israel's cultus. Study, reflection and prayer in the synagogue was led by teachers, scribes and rabbis (the word "rabbi" literally means, "my teacher"). Temple worship was led by Israel's priesthood, overseen by Israel's high priest. The power of the Temple lay in the Sanhedrin (a council of priests, Sadducees and chief rabbis and scribes), chaired by the high priest; this was the Jerusalem Clergy Aristocracy who were the direct negotiators and collaborators with Rome. The power of the synagogues lay in its disbursed religious authority, and the chief rabbis they selected to represent them on the Sanhedrin.

It is impossible to understand the significance of what happened in this first public action by Jesus without first understanding both the place and the symbol of the synagogue in first-century Jewish society as presented above. Let's now look at Mark 1:21-28 in the light of our study of the place of the synagogue in Israelite culture.

First, it is significant that *Jesus' first public action takes place in a synagogue* on the Sabbath. Jesus has entered sacred space, the symbol of Israel's systems arrayed against him. He enters it at a sacred time – the Sabbath gathering time for the people of Capernaum. Having entered the system's sacred space at its sacred time, Jesus immediately takes charge of its proceedings. Mark tells us "Jesus entered the synagogue and taught" (1:21)! Entering that space, Jesus quickly "takes it over" and begins dominating its worship and study by effectively assuming what is the normal prerogatives and responsibility of its rabbi. It would be comparable to a stranger walking into one of our churches while worship was proceeding and simply taking over the conduct of that worship by beginning to preach the sermon! Outrageous!

The very repetition of Mark's description underscores Jesus' domination of the situation: "he entered the synagogue and taught" (1:21), "they were astounded at his teaching" (1:22a); "he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes" (1:22b). The people respond both to such boldness and to the content of what he is teaching. "What is this? A new teaching – with authority" (1:27b). The passage begins and ends with the assertion that Jesus is teaching with a new authority. Mark is making painfully clear the ground Jesus is capturing.

Second, *such a domination* of "sacred space" and "sacred time" by Jesus *gets a predictable response*. "Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, and he cried out, "What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us?" (1:23-24) Note how carefully is Mark's choice of words. The man didn't enter the synagogue either to receive healing from Jesus or to combat Jesus. Rather, *the man is already in the synagogue*. He is a permanent fixture in the synagogue; a regular in attendance. This man was of the essence of

⁴ The actual Ark of the Covenant, containing within it the original tablets of the Law, no longer existed by the time of Jesus. But in its place was a substitute Ark, surrounded by the religious symbols of Israel's cultic life.

the synagogue and of Israel's system it represents. He is not peripheral to that system, but is of its very essence. So the conflict between the synagogue's "unclean spirit" – the "unclean spirit" of Israel's entire religious system in collaboration with Roman political and economic domination – and Jesus begins.

"What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us?" The Greek "what have you to do with us" can be better translated "What do we have in common?" or "Why do you meddle with us?" The unclean spirit of the synagogue attacks Jesus with the complaint, "What are you doing, messing in our business?" He then calls the Christ, "Jesus of Nazareth". That is, in reality, a put-down: "You, Jesus, of such a lowly and obscure place as Nazareth." In essence, the demoniac is saying in this passage, "Why are you coming in here, dominating our teachings and taking away our power, you inconsequential no-body?"

The demon then moves to expose Jesus for whom he is: "I know who you are, the Holy One of God" (1:24b). The demon knows Jesus' identity. In Mark, most of the demons know who Jesus is (1:34; 3:11; 5:7-8) and seek to make it known, whereas Jesus seeks to keep this information secret (1:34, 44; 3:12; 5:43; 7:36; 8:30; 9:9). Why was it important for the demoniac to expose Jesus for whom he truly is?

First-century Jews believed that if you knew the name of a person, you knew his inner essence (the name described the essence of a person: thus "Jesus" means "God saves"; "Judas" means "the betrayer"). If you named a person during a confrontation, you had control over him because you knew his inner essence. Thus, the demon seeks to gain control over Jesus by publicly naming him. But Jesus exerts his authority by casting out the demon (vs. 26) with the words, "Be silent, and come out of him" (vs. 25). Jesus is more powerful than the demon and the systems that demon represents.

An intriguing side note is that the words Jesus uses, "Be silent", is an extremely strong, even confrontive command, comparable to our "shut up!" Jesus is commanding the demon to shut his mouth! This very expression would emphasize to the reader Jesus' command of the situation. Jesus has the power, proven in this confrontation, to assert his authority and establish his Kingdom even in the face of the most intense opposition from the political, economic and religious systems – or even the demonic principalities and powers that drive and empower those systems!

The story ends, "And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him. They were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, "What is this? A new teaching – with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him." At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee" (1:26-28).

The people understood what was going on. This story is the inauguration of the battle between Jesus and Israel's (and even Rome's) systems for domination of Israel and its people. It is a battle not just among the people or in the economic, political and religious culture of the nation. It is also a cosmic battle, a battle between the forces of God and the forces of evil, complicated by the reality that it was the forces of evil that most used "God-talk" to disguise their ravishing

of the nation's economy and politics for their own dominating ends. As one New Testament scholar has put it,

“The demon in the synagogue becomes the representative of the scribal establishment, whose “authority” undergirds the dominant Jewish social order. Exorcism represents an act of confrontation in the war of myths in which Jesus asserts his alternative authority. Only this interpretation can explain why exorcism is at issue in the scribal counterattack upon Jesus later in 3:22ff”.⁵

Deuteronomy 18:15-20 records Moses' words when he prophesied, “The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own people; you shall heed such a prophet” (18:15). He then goes on to elaborate, “Then the Lord replied to me, “I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their own people; I will put my words in the mouth of the prophet, who shall speak to them everything that I command. Anyone who does not heed the words that the prophet shall speak in my name, I myself will hold accountable” (18:17a, 18-19).

Moses, the pre-eminent prophet of the Old Testament period, states in this passage that God would communicate His will to Israel through a succession of prophets. But none would be equal to Moses until God sent “a prophet like me” who would bring into being a new covenant between God and his people and would reveal God's intentions to and call of humanity even more clearly than had Moses. This was “the prophet” (John 1:21) for whom Israel was looking.

What would be the role of one who was to be God's prophet “like Moses”? It would clearly mean that this person would stand in the tradition of Moses, and did not presume to teach anything that would stray from the central truths Moses had presented.

That is the significance in our Gospel lesson for today with the response of those attending that synagogue in Capernaum, “What is this? A new teaching – with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him” (Mark 1:27). Was Jesus teaching a new teaching other than the tradition of Moses? If so, he was not standing in the prophetic line of Moses. If Jesus was not teaching a new Law, then were the rabbis and priests teaching a false doctrine? And if he were teaching other than the tradition of Moses, then how explain his driving out the unclean spirits, telling them to shut up! Someone unfaithful to the teachings of Moses wouldn't be given such authority from God!

So, was Jesus teaching a new teaching? Or had the rabbis and priests – had Israel's religious establishment – lost sight of the heart of Moses' teaching as they concentrated upon “mint, dill and cummin while you have neglected the more important matters of the law – justice, mercy and faithfulness” (Matt. 23:23, NIV)? Had Israel's spiritual leadership so concentrated upon collaborating with Rome in order to maintain power and wealth in their own hands that they, in their interpretation of Moses, had created that “new teaching” that would make them the false prophets, rather than Jesus? Who was truly doing “a new teaching” – Jesus or the rabbis? Who was being truly faithful to Moses? And who, therefore, was truly acting as “the prophet”?

⁵ Ched Myers, *Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark's Story of Jesus* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Press, 1988), p. 143.

The very book that presents to the reader the vision of a new prophet like Moses who will speak to Israel “everything that God commands” is also the book that can answer the question, “Is Jesus the prophet like Moses, or is he a false prophet who should be eliminated” (18:20)?

The book of Deuteronomy draws toward its close as Moses brings all Israel together to make a common covenant. The great prophet says to them, “See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God that I am commanding you today, by loving the Lord your God, walking in his ways, and observing his commandments, decrees and ordinances, then you shall live and become numerous and the Lord your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to possess. Choose life, so that you and your descendants may live” (Deut. 30:15-16, 19b).

And what are those “commandments, decrees and ordinances” by which Israel, in obeying them, will “choose life”? Those commandments, decrees and ordinances make up Deuteronomy, chapters six to twenty-six. But they can be implemented in a nation by simply building the nation’s religious, political and economic systems according to God’s intentions, and to create dedicated roles for the prophet and people. Let’s look at Deuteronomy’s analysis of those systems and roles more closely.

The religious system should be one in which the people and the system itself is in a dynamic love relationship with God and therefore, in a deeply caring and committed relationship with each other (Deut. 10:12-11:1).

The political system should have as its primary purpose to maintain justice with order. But that justice is to be compensatory rather than distributive in which society compensates those formerly treated unjustly in order to create a “level playing field” rather than a justice that assumes automatic equality (Deut. 16:18-20; 17:8-20).

The economic system should be one in which the nation’s and each person’s wealth does not belong ultimately to them but rather belongs to God who invests it in his people for them to be good stewards of its resources in order to eliminate all poverty from that nation (Deut. 6:10-15; 15:1-17).

A primary role to be played in Israel was that of ***the Prophet***. Prophets existed as God’s means to call the political, economic and religious systems and to call the people of Israel to continued accountability to God and each other for maintaining a dynamic relationship with God, a politics of justice and an economics of equitable distribution of wealth eliminating poverty (Deut. 18:15-19).

The second strategic role in Israel was that of ***the People***. The people of Israel had been called by God to be engaged in public life by applying the requirements for the systems to themselves (i.e., practicing a relational culture, acting justly, being good stewards, fighting poverty) (Deut. 7:7-11; 8:11-20).

When one looks at this Deuteronomic understanding of the heart of Moses' teachings, and then at the ministry of Jesus as well as the obvious priorities of Israel's religious establishment that created such anger in Jesus, it is clear who is the true prophet and who is the false prophet. So was Jesus' teaching "a new teaching – with authority"? Or was it implementing Moses' teaching to a new generation, and doing that with such conviction, power and vision that the demons – and systems – of the world tremble?

Psalm 111 is a hymn of praise for God's wonderful works. But rather than these "works" being described historically (e.g., "he rescued us from Egypt") or in nature (e.g., "he made the hills and valleys for the antelope and the oxen"), the author describes God's works conceptually. This is most unusual because if anything is true of Hebrew poetry, it is that it is most earthy and specific.

The psalmist writes, "Great are the works of the Lord, studied by all who delight in them. Full of honor and majesty is his work, and his righteousness endures forever. He has gained renown by his wonderful deeds; the Lord is gracious and merciful. He provides food for those who fear him; he is ever mindful of his covenant. He has shown his people the power of his works, in giving them the heritage of the nations" (vss. 2-6).

Thus, the author of Psalm 111 celebrates God's work among God's people by describing God's characteristics. That is, the author uses a description of God's work to describe God's character. Thus, God has acted justly, honorably, graciously and mercifully toward us. Those actions have told us that Yahweh is a just, honorable, gracious and merciful God. Then, having drawn that conclusion, the Psalmist ends the Psalm with these words:

"The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom! All those who practice it have a good understanding. His praise endures forever" (vs. 10)!

I Corinthians 8:1-13 is St. Paul's profound teaching to the Christians in Corinth about what they should do in regards to eating food offered to idols.

Essentially, the problem the Christians in Corinth were facing was the reality that the best food and the choicest cuts of meat for sale in the marketplace was all food that was first offered to Roman and Greek gods as a sacrifice. Was it appropriate for Christians to eat such food, recognizing the biblical injunctions against idolatry (Deut. 4:15-20; 6:4)?

Paul's advice is simple. Because we have been freed by Christ from the worship of other gods and are redeemed by Yahweh, then idols are precisely that – nothing but idols. The only people being fooled by such idols are the idol worshippers themselves. We are therefore free to eat any meat – including food offered to idols.

But the essential obligation of the Christian is to not offend a believer who believes differently. If another Christian believes it is wrong to eat food offered to idols, and my eating it would cause a crisis of faith in that brother or sister, then I am obligated not to eat it. As Paul applies this

principle to himself, he states, “Therefore, if food is a cause of (another Christian’s) falling, I will never eat meat, so that I may not cause one of them to fall” (8:13).

The principle Paul is enunciating is that responsibility is of greater importance than liberty. It is not your liberty as a Christian that is primary. It is your responsibility toward a weaker believer. Simply because you are free to act in a particular way is not justification for so acting, for your actions can become an impediment to another Christian or even a non-believer. Your actions shouldn’t get in the way of a believer’s growth in Christ or an unbeliever’s acceptance of Christ. Christian community is founded on Christ’s death for each person (Rom. 14:15). You are not acting in community when you act to serve yourself with no thought of that action’s impact upon others. To sin against one person is, in reality, to sin against Christ (8:12; cf. Mt. 25:45).

Essentially, what Paul is dealing with in this passage (and, for that matter, in the entirety of both letters to the Corinthian Church) is the sin of arrogance! The essential problem is not idolatry. What lies behind the behavior of the Corinthian Christians is a far more serious problem of “attitude”! They are approaching each other, their life together as a church, and their ministry to the people and systems of Corinth with “attitude”! Their conduct is being guided by pride, not love (cf. I Cor. 13). They do not understand that the essence of love is seeking the good of others above one’s own good!

Thus, what Paul is essentially saying is that when Christians place their own rights above others needs, then they, too, have become like the people of that Capernaum synagogue who no longer worship the God of Jesus and of Moses and exemplify that worship in their work for justice, mercy and faithfulness. They become like those who embrace the political, economic and religious standards of the world rather than the standards of God’s kingdom, and thus become like that demoniac who seeks, in his arrogance, to “take Jesus on” and discovers, in doing so, that he cannot help but lose!

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