



Roanoke, Virginia

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“A Single Act”

Mark 1:21-28

Rev. Elizabeth N.H. Link

Introduction:

Our Scripture reading comes from the NT Gospel of Mark. We are 20 verses into the first Gospel’s story. The Gospel writer wastes no time jumping right in with this powerful inauguration of Jesus’ ministry.

Mark 1:21-28

²¹They went to Capernaum; and when the sabbath came, [Jesus] entered the synagogue and taught. ²²They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes. ²³Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, ²⁴and he cried out, ‘What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God.’ ²⁵But Jesus rebuked him, saying, ‘Be silent, and come out of him!’ ²⁶And the unclean spirit, throwing him into convulsions and crying with a loud voice, came out of him. ²⁷They 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.’ ²⁸At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.



Sermon:

Jesus has just called his first disciples. The water was barely dry on Simon and Andrew's fishing nets left on the beach, and already they are in Capernaum together. At the synagogue, Mark tells us, Jesus begins to teach, but not like the scribes.

The scribes were trained, educated professionals entrusted with specific responsibilities—record keeping, handling of correspondences, maintenance of archives, and scholarship. The authority of Jesus, however, is different. Were we to read the earlier verses in Mark 1, we would see that Jesus' authority was received at his baptism where he is endowed with the Holy Spirit. Mark is seeking to draw attention to the stark difference of authority between Jesus and the scribes. As one commentator notes, this is “the difference between charisma and custodianship.”ⁱ

Interestingly, Mark speaks of Jesus' teaching a lot—but rarely explains what it is specifically that he is teaching. It is as though the gospel writer means to underscore not the content of Jesus' teaching, but its impact. Jesus' authority comes not from what he says, but from who he is.

Well, then, who is he?

Jesus himself has said nothing about who he is at this point in the story. In fact, Jesus will go the better part of this gospel without confessing he is the Messiah. Modern scholars call this the Messianic secret. Jesus' followers keep asking and telling him that they believe he must be the Son of God, but Jesus keeps telling them to keep it zipped.

For instance, later in Mark 1, Jesus heals a leper. He tells the man, “See that you say nothing to anyone; but go, show yourself to the priest...” (v44).

In Mark 8, Peter plainly says to Jesus “You are the Messiah.” While Jesus sternly orders his disciples “not to tell anyone about him” (vv29-30).

Now, it's hard to keep something like that a secret. Especially when Jesus goes around healing, teaching a new word, and casting out unclean spirits. It takes some time, and eventually his disciples have an inkling who he really is.

But here in Mark 1, right off the bat, the demon sees him clearly. “You are the Holy One of God.”

Can you imagine it? Remember worship in a packed sanctuary? Imagine these pews filled with people listening. Even if you heard something you didn't like from the pulpit, decorum dictates you follow up later with a pointed email or phone call on Monday morning, there's not outburst in the middle of someone's sermon or lesson here. So, can you imagine the scene in the synagogue?



No one has a clue as to what brought the outburst. It appears an unclean spirit has identified this rabbi as one who has the authority to exorcize, and this unclean spirit calls him out by name. “What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us?”

I won’t pretend to know what the “unclean spirit” in this story actually is. Some recast it as a mental illness, or as a medical condition like epilepsy. Others insist on it being an actual demon. Still more argue that spirits in the New Testament are metaphors for anything that might “possess” or “control” us—anger, fear, greed, hatred, envy.... I don’t know which of these explanations is true, but I don’t think it matters. The man was ravaged by whatever it is. According to Mark, “the man had no voice of his own—the spirit spoke for him. The man had no control over his body—the spirit convulsed him. The man had no community—the spirit isolated him. And the man had no dignity—the spirit dehumanized him.”ⁱⁱ

The unclean spirit in this man cries out from the synagogue floor, “What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God.”

I’ve never had a sermon heckler, but I can picture the scene, and it’s shocking.

But Jesus doesn’t hesitate. He rebukes the spirit and casts it out of the man, freeing him forever.

As David Lose points out, “first things” tend to set the tone for much of what is to follow in a story. In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus climbs a mountain to teach and interpret the law like Moses. In Luke, Jesus announces that the Lord has sent him to proclaim the good news, release, and healing. And in John, the first thing Jesus does is multiply wine and blessing at Cana, living into the “grace upon grace” promised in John’s Prologue. So, what does this first miracle tell us about Jesus according to Mark’s story? Lose writes that “[Jesus] has come to oppose the forces of evil, defined not generically but rather as anything and everything that robs God’s children of life.”ⁱⁱⁱ

He has come to oppose anything and everything that robs God’s children of life.

Consider with me... What is robbing you of life right now, child of God? Where are your places of brokenness or disappointment or fear? What demons rob you of your voice, your control, your wellbeing? There are days when it is hard to trust God’s Word is greater than the political name-calling and cacophony of conspiracy theories. There are days when the social media driven obsession with our own ideas, our thoughts, and appearance is all we see. And there are days when our pandemic malaise numbs our emotions and weighs us down. But there is not a day—there is not a minute—when God is not with us in all of this.

Humans of New York is an Instagram feed in which a photographer shares beautiful snapshots of real life, ordinary human beings and offers a piece of that person’s story. Each post is beautiful and moving in its own way. Four days ago, the post featured the snapshot and story of a



young woman named Alexis. In her own words, she explains that she was 14 years old when she realized her mother was addicted to drugs. Things went downhill pretty quickly. The car got repossessed, the family was evicted, and her mom started disappearing for days at a time. Suddenly, this high schooler became the primary caregiver for her younger sibling. Understandably, she was angry. She shared that she would lash out at any adult who tried to tell her what to do. On the first day of her senior year of high school, a teacher named Mrs. Mahfood asked Alexis to put her phone away. Alexis shot back with a snotty remark, but the teacher didn't respond the way Alexis anticipated. Alexis writes, "I think she sort of caught onto my situation. During the rest of the semester, she would never rush to punish me when I acted out. She'd ask me questions, like: 'Is everything OK at home?' And: 'Have you eaten yet today?'" The two grew close, and Mrs. Mahfood would check in with Alexis to make sure she was doing her homework and completing graduations requirements. She convinced Alexis to take the SATs and attend community college. Mrs. Mahfood was there when she graduated. Today, Alexis is herself a teacher.

How different could this young woman's life have been had no one taken an interest? How different might this story be if no one had intervened?

In our Gospel story, Jesus stepped directly into the pain and ugliness of that synagogue scene. He didn't flinch. As Debie Thomas writes, "[Jesus'] brand of holiness didn't require him to keep his hands clean. He was in the fear, in the sickness, in the nightmare, ready to engage anything that diminished the lives of those he loved." Yes, Jesus preached with great effectiveness to the faithful, but he also spoke the unclean spirit's language, listened to its cries, and rebuked it for the sake of a broken man's health and sanity. The unclean spirit demanded, "What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth?" Everything. Jesus has everything to do with those evils that rob us of life. Wherever brokenness, pain, and darkness may be found? There God goes with us. This is the promise of the Gospel.

The exorcism of the unclean spirit is Jesus' first act in Mark. Jesus crosses into those spaces where no one else is willing to go.^{iv} That's who God is—that's what God does. Jesus has ushered in God's kingdom, opened up a future of possibility and hope, and equips us to live in that kingdom now.

A single act. One man helped. A single life changed for the better.

If we are to follow, perhaps that's where we are called to start.

In this difficult season we're all walking through, I pray that Jesus continues to make himself known. He sees our sickness, our fears, our compulsions, our sins, and our despair—everything that we try to keep from others and everything that keeps us from helping others—and he doesn't recoil. But he calls it out—he pricks our conscience. Sometimes our lives actually get harder when we move toward faith and healing—because, as one commentator put it, "unclean spirits always fight



the hardest when their time is up.”^v Mark is trying to show us with this first simple act that Jesus is in the mess with us, and he refuses to leave us there.

I pray that we will listen to this teacher. I pray that we may be brave enough to follow where he leads. And I pray that we may rest in the good news truth that God is with us. God is with us. God is here.

ⁱ C. Clifton Black, *Mark* (Abingdon New Testament Commentaries. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2011), 72.

ⁱⁱ Debie Thomas, Journey with Jesus, “Astounded.” Posted January 24, 2021 (www.journeywithjesus.net).

ⁱⁱⁱ David Lose, In the Meantime, “Epiphany 4B: The Continuing Invitation.” Posted January 25, 2021 (www.davidlose.net).

^{iv} Karoline Lewis, Dear Working Preacher, “What Is This?” Posted January 21, 2018 (www.workingpreacher.org).

^v Thomas (www.journeywithjesus.net).

