



For the past few Sundays we have been hearing stories about what I would call the “launch” of Jesus’s ministry. We’ve talked about how Jesus called his disciples. We’ve talked about why those disciples followed Jesus. Today we hear about one of the first things Jesus does as he begins his ministry. For the past two weeks I’ve preached sermons on these early days of Jesus’s ministry. I think today might fall into the category of a “Bible study” – but maybe we can learn something together.

I will be reading from the first chapter of the Gospel of Mark. Before I read it, let’s pray and then be centered by the choir as we prepare to encounter God’s word:

O God, we come once again to ask you to open our minds by your Spirit that we might hear a fresh word. Candidly, we spend much of our time distracted, busy, surrounded by noise and things that clamor for our attention. So, most of all, in these moments – help us be present. Draw our focus away from the quickening pace of our everyday lives. Remind us of what is most true. We ask it in Jesus’s name. Amen.

+++

I’m reading from the first chapter of Mark’s gospel, beginning at the 21st verse. This is just after Jesus has called together his team of disciples and when he begins his public ministry. Listen with me for a word from God:

They went to Capernaum;
and when the Sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught.
They were astounded at his teaching,
for he taught them as one having authority,
and not as the scribes.

Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, and he cried out, “What have to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth?
Have you come to destroy us?

I know who you are, the Holy One of God.”
But Jesus rebuked him, saying, “Be silent, and come out of him!”
And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him.

They were all amazed, and they kept 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.

+++

The first New Testament class I took was not in seminary, but as an undergrad at the UNC. The class had around 500 people in it – it met in a large lecture hall – and was taught by a professor named Dr. Bart Ehrman.

One of the early days of the semester – after we had all come into class and settled in our seats...even after he had begun to lecture a little bit – Dr. Ehrman stopped what he was doing and asked a strange question: He asked for four volunteers to tell their version of what had happened from the time they came into the classroom until that moment. Dr. Ehrman employed four of his Teaching Assistants to let each of the four volunteers speak into a microphone to tell their version (you don't teach a 500-person class without Teaching Assistants). As he stood on the stage at the front of the room, Dr. Ehrman made four columns on the whiteboard and wrote down each student volunteer's version of events.

It didn't take long for us all to notice that each of those columns was different – because each of the student volunteers were different. Each version emphasized different things. Sometimes the order of things was a little different. Some things made the list of one or two, and didn't make the list of the others. One had something I was sure didn't happen.

When he stepped back to look at the whiteboard with those different versions of what had happened over the last 10 minutes – in his most profosorial way – Dr. Ehrman asked – rhetorically: Why do you think each of the four gospels of the New Testament is different in the way they tell the story of what happened in Jesus's life? And does the fact that they are different make them any less true?

+++

At some point in his life – after he grew up as a boy in Nazareth, his father, Joseph, a carpenter, his mother Mary helping to raise him up in the faith – at some point...we think it happened when he was around 30 years old – Jesus gets the sense that he was ready. He gets baptized by John the Baptist. He spends some time in the desert – a kind of spiritual pilgrimage to help him focus. He recruits his disciples. And then he begins what we've learned to call his “public ministry.”

Here's the funny thing, though. Each of the gospels tells a different story about the first thing Jesus does in that public ministry.

In the gospel of Matthew, the first thing Jesus does is give his famous “Sermon on the Mount” to the adoring crowds on the banks of the Sea of Galilee.



In the gospel of Luke, the first thing Jesus does is preach a sermon that steps ***all over*** the toes of those at his home synagogue in Nazareth.

In John’s gospel, the first thing Jesus does is go to a wedding in nearby Cana, where his mother Mary thrusts him into public ministry by asking Jesus to help solve the problem of there not being enough wine for the party.

But in Mark’s gospel, the **first thing** Jesus does in his public ministry is an exorcism in the synagogue at Capernaum.

You know...if it were me...I might want something a little different for my first Sunday on the new job. Maybe a meeting. A Bible study. A fellowship event. In Mark, Jesus comes right out of the gate with an exorcism. How’s that for “other duties as assigned?”

I confess that I’ve never performed an exorcism before. And, to be honest, it’s one of those things in the Bible that I imagine trips some modern people up when they read it – maybe it does that to you? It sounds either like the Bible’s out-of-touch way to describe what we now understand to be mental-illness, or some kind of embellished way to make an old-fashioned story more dramatic.

But here is what I want you to think of when you hear about exorcisms in the Bible – this one, and any others you come across: an exorcism is kind of like the Bible’s way of describing what happens when the inhuman powers of the world that sometimes possess people are exposed and expelled.

I bet if you think creatively enough, you might know people who are possessed by things like greed, or racism, or spite, or hate...sometimes to the point where those things render a person unrecognizable from who you once knew them to be.

An exorcism is what happens when the people who have been possessed by those things wake up, take notice, and are freed from what has polluted their lives¹.

When the gospel writer Mark introduces us to the Jesus who is ready for prime time in his ministry, the first thing Mark wants us to notice is that even the inhuman powers of this world recognize Jesus as an authority – as a force who can disrupt the hold that those powers have on people’s lives.

+++

What gave Jesus’s authority away was his teaching.

¹ These two paragraphs are a Sunday-Morning-Preacher’s way of boiling down the work of those like Walter Wink and Ched Meyers into an overly simplistic bite.



Mark says that those in the synagogue in Capernaum who heard Jesus teach that day were “astounded.” In the original language of Mark, that is a word that is kind of a mixture of fascinated and outraged...at the same time. We might say that Jesus was the kind of teacher who provoked people to think in new and challenging ways.

You know what I wish?

I wish the Bible gave us a little more detail on **WHAT** Jesus taught.

Wouldn’t you like to see that lesson plan?

There are very few places in Scripture where we get to hear what Jesus said. Sometimes we get a parable. Sometimes we get some snippets of a sermon. But most of the time all we hear is a report **about** Jesus teaching.

There’s no record of what Jesus taught in the Capernaum synagogue on that first day, but whatever it was, the truth of it...the authority of it...penetrated both the minds of the people there, as well as the powers that possessed the man with the unclean spirit. It makes me wonder what was so different than what those folks had been used to hearing.

What we know is that the people in the synagogue had been used to hearing from a group called the Scribes. The Scribes were authorities on the Jewish law (which came from Scripture). And a lot of what the Scribes tended to focus on was how to apply and interpret the law within the context of the particular community where the Scribe lived. In other words, they spent a good deal of their teaching focused on who, in the community, was included...and who was not...and what behavior was deemed acceptable and what behavior was not.

Maybe you can already see a potential short-coming in this kind of approach to teaching.

The pastor Gerhard Frost captures the problem that plagued the Scribes with a poem. He writes:

*When your options are either
to revise your beliefs
or to reject a person,
look again.
Any formula for living
that is too cramped
for the human situation
cries for rethinking.*

*Hardcover catechisms
are a contradiction
to our loose-leaf lives.²*

Even though we don’t have the lesson plans that Jesus used to teach that day, what we do have is evidence of the way he lived: eating with people considered to be unclean, befriending those who were marginalized, loving those who were rejected, tending to his enemies. We might not know the content of Jesus’s lesson plans, but we can be sure they were “loose-leaf” (not “hardcover”) in nature – because we know that what Jesus cared about a lot more than labels and categories was meeting and loving people where they were. This, I think, was one difference in the way Jesus taught that spoke to his authority.

Another thing that I think led to Jesus’s authority is the urgency with which he taught. We get a glimpse of it in today’s passage – where Jesus wastes no time dispensing of the unclean spirit who had interrupted his teaching – so that he could get back to the matter at hand. We see it all the way through the gospel of Mark when we find Jesus to be – almost in a hurry – to teach and to heal and to spread the message about the coming reign of God. Jesus speaks about the good news of God’s reign as if it is happening...not as if it were an idea or a theory...but as a fact. And at the end of Mark’s gospel, when the provocative lessons that Jesus taught finally got him crucified, when he took his last breath on the cross – Mark tells us that the curtain in the Temple that was believed to separate the holiness of God’s presence from the unclean nature of those of us made in God’s image was ripped in two.

It was the final illustration of the message that Jesus was sent to teach us:

that the reign of God is here;
that God is involved and present in our world;
that the dream that God has for what our world will be is coming to pass;
that all will be made well.

It took a teacher with a special kind of authority to look at the messy, loose-leaf-kind-of-world of that day and insist that God was at work to make it right – but that was the kind of message that Jesus came to bring. And those who heard him, even if it made them uncomfortable, could recognize the authority with which Jesus taught that lesson.

+ + +

Late last week – with the seeds of this morning’s Scripture still trying to find their way to take root in this preacher’s mind – I sat down to lunch with a member who I had been wanting to see for quite some time. There was no agenda, just a chance to catch up on life, family, work, and church. Over chips, salsa and tacos,

² Frost, Gerhard, *Seasons of a Lifetime*, p.57 Augsburg Press, 1989



we covered the waterfront of how each of us had been and what was coming up...building connection and trust that often comes when two friends who haven't seen each other in a while finally get a chance talk.

Near the end of the meal, this member asked me a question in a slightly different tone...one that had the slightest edge of worry...maybe concern. I recognized the tone because it's one that I sometimes share.

“Pen – I’ve got to say, when I look around at the state of things – the way people treat each other, the conflicts and wars that rage in different parts of the world, the senseless violence that threatens our kids...I mean, how are we supposed to think about all of this stuff? Where does it end?”

I knew he wasn't actually expecting me to answer – which is good, because *I* didn't have an answer.

But what I did share with him was a conviction that I have staked my life upon because I believe it comes to us on good authority:

That even in these days, confounding and troublesome as they may be...even in these days – with our lives and those lives of others close to us that don't seem to want to fit into hardcover catechisms – that even in these days God is active and at work in bending our world toward a future that ends in hope.

I know believing that takes courage.

And maybe a willingness to ignore other voices that try to convince us otherwise.

But God broke into this world through a Son in order that we might be able to recognize and trust what is true – and have that truth shape the ways we live.

+++

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.