

They went to Capernaum, and when the Sabbath came, Jesus went into the synagogue and began to teach.²² The people were amazed at his teaching, because he taught them as one who had authority, not as the teachers of the law.²³ Just then a man in their synagogue who was possessed by an evil spirit cried out,²⁴ “What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are—the Holy One of God!”²⁵ “Be quiet!” said Jesus sternly. “Come out of him!”²⁶ The evil spirit shook the man violently and came out of him with a shriek.²⁷ The people were all so amazed that they asked each other, “What is this? A new teaching—and with authority! He even gives orders to evil spirits and they obey him.”²⁸ News about him spread quickly over the whole region of Galilee. (Mark 1:21-28)

Jesus has Authority

Who’s in charge in your home? A member of my last church used to say, “I’m the head of the house. And my wife is the neck that turns the head.” His little joke says a lot about the interplay between authority and influence. Who’s in charge? You can ask that question at another level: who’s in charge in your home, the parents or the kids? I once saw a cartoon that pictured two parents cowering before a nine foot tall toddler. How often don’t we parents live in fear of our children’s temper tantrums? And that’s not just true when they’re toddlers! How do parents establish their authority? I’ve seen moms and dads just pick up a protesting toddler and carry them away. The other day, I saw a lady at the library telling her 1st or 2nd grader that it was time to go. When he didn’t listen she said, “Well, we’re going. We’ll see you later.” And she headed for the car. Sometimes we try things like that. Sometimes, we make a threat: “Do what I’m telling you or there will be consequences.” Who’s in charge? That question speaks of authority and power and how we establish it and use it. But it doesn’t just apply in our homes. It applies in our government, in our jobs, in our schools and even in our kids’ sports leagues. Today, in our gospel lesson, Jesus addresses that issue. Who’s in charge? He is.

Jesus has authority.

I.

Now, that doesn’t surprise us, does it? We expect Jesus to have authority. We call him “Lord.” But we call him that because we know who he really was, the Son of God. **Jesus has authority, authority that belongs to him.** In our gospel lesson, that wasn’t clear yet. It was relatively early in Jesus’ ministry. He was in Galilee in the fishing village of Capernaum. By this time, he had established himself as a rabbi, a teacher. So on the Sabbath, he went to the synagogue and preached. Mark says, **“The people were amazed at his teaching, because he taught them as one who had authority, not as the teachers of the law.”** What does Mark mean? When I preach a sermon, I try not to speculate about what could be true. A sermon is not supposed to be about my theological speculations or about my personal opinions. It’s not supposed to be about my politics or my take on society. I’m supposed to tell you what God says and apply it to your life.

The Jewish rabbis went even farther. They worked very hard to make sure that they could cite an authority for everything they said. They would say, “Rabbi Hillel tells us that this means this. Rabbi Gamaliel tells us that this means this.” They would cite endlessly and strive never to say anything unless they could point to a greater authority who had already made that point. The one thing they never wanted to be accused of was introducing a new teaching. Only God could do that.

Jesus did not preach like that. He didn’t care what Hillel or Gamaliel or any other rabbi had said. He didn’t even preach the way I preach. Jesus was the Son of God. He knew what God’s people needed to hear. He knew what God wanted them to hear because he was God. So he preached with an authority that no other human pastor or teacher could ever have. Now, that doesn’t mean that what he said in any way disagrees with anything the Bible says. The Bible is the Word of God, so it’s Jesus’ word, too. He often quoted it and everything that he taught agrees with everything that God taught in every other place in the Bible. But Jesus didn’t need a Bible passage for everything he said. He could simply tell the people what God wanted them to understand because he was the Son of God. He could tell them new things that the Old Testament had not yet revealed. His words carried all the authority that every other word of Scripture carries.

The people had never heard anything like that. That shouldn’t surprise us, because there never was a pastor or teacher like Jesus. He was the ultimate proclaimer of the gospel. His ministry is the foundation of all

ministry since. It was the fulfillment of all the promises God had made – the promises of a prophet to come, the promises of the good news being proclaimed throughout the world, the promises of light for the Gentiles and glory for God’s people Israel. He came to proclaim that good news.

But even more than that, he came fulfill that good news. The Son of God came into this world to win eternal life for us. He had the power to make that happen. In another place, Jesus said that he had authority to lay down his life and authority to take it up again. The Son of God had a purpose when he came down to our world. He came to conquer the sin and the guilt, the death and the hell that threaten all of us. He was the only one who could do that.

Those threats are real. My friends, you come here Sunday after Sunday and you hear the same message: you’re sinners and you’re forgiven. That’s the only thing that I have the authority to announce, because my ministry must rest on Christ. The reason that God sent me to proclaim that message is that you and I live in a dying world. What disaster can we ever undo? How many times in your life do you wish that you had done something different or that could go back and undo things that you did? We are trapped in our lives. We’re trapped by the consequences of our own pride and sin and the consequences of the pride and sin of other people. We pay every day for the sinful choices we make and that others have made around us and before us. Not one of us has the power to change that.

But Jesus did. He died to break the hold that sin has on our lives. He laid down his life to pay for our sinful choices and attitudes. He died to set us free for the guilt we bring on ourselves. He died to set us free from all the hurt and sorrow that our sin and the sins of other bring on us here. Jesus had the authority to lay down his life in our place and the authority to take up that life and set us free. And he proclaimed that gospel – that new teaching. The teaching Jesus brought gives us hope now. And it promises us that we will live with him forever, free from all sin and guilt, free from all hurt and sorrow. Only Jesus has that authority.

II.

Jesus uses that authority. During the season of Epiphany – this time between Christmas and Lent – we hear a number of miracle stories in our gospel lessons. That’s because one of the themes of this season is that Jesus is the true Son of God. Every time he does a miracle, he reveals his power as God. **Jesus has authority, authority that he demonstrates.**

The specific miracle in our gospel lesson for today is driving out a demon. In the modern world sometimes we wrestle with the Bible’s accounts of demon possession. We certainly don’t see much of it. In my entire ministry, I’ve seen one case where there was even any question about it, and that turned out to be just a troubled teenager. Many people today believe that’s all it was in the past: mental illness. Now, I don’t want to endorse the Hollywood nonsense about demon possession that you would see in movies, but demon possession is real and it’s more than just mental illness.

So why don’t we see it much today? In Jesus’ day, there was an epidemic of demon possession. If it’s real, where are the cases today? Well, outside of the three years of Jesus’ ministry and the early years of the Christian Church, demon possession is not mentioned much in the Bible. In the whole Old Testament, there are only a couple of instances. But it definitely peaked during the time of Christ and the years when the apostles were establishing the New Testament Church. Why? The answer that makes the most sense is that the devil pulled out all the stops because he knew who Jesus was. The devil was desperate to slow down the gospel.

So on that day when Jesus was teaching in the synagogue, a demon possessed man stood up right there and challenged him. He said, **“What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are—the Holy One of God!”** The demon knew who Jesus was. He *was* the Holy One of God. But why admit to it if he wanted to ruin the Lord’s work? He wanted to undercut Jesus’ ministry. Would you go to a man that a demon identifies as your Savior? Or would your first inclination be to suspect that there must be something wrong?

How did Jesus answer? Our translation of the Bible soft pedals it a little bit: “Be quiet!” The Greek literally says, “Be muzzled!” It’s fair to say that Jesus’ words carried something of the force of “Shut up!” And then he told the demon to get out. And he did. He didn’t say one more word. He screamed, but he could not debate any further. The most he could do was shake that man on his way out. Jesus demonstrated his authority. The people were amazed.

What does all this have to do with us? Well, even if we never have to face demon possession, the devil is real. You just have to turn on your television or your computer to see how much influence he has in our

world. I bought my wife a Nook for Christmas and we were flipping through the free books. We were amazed at how many of them are pornographic. I went into the settings to see if there's some way to block those, and if there is, I can't find it. The devil has his fingers in every aspect of our lives. What's he trying to do? Not possess us. That's just a tool. He wants to drag us down to hell. The devil hates God. He rebelled against him and poisoned his creation. He knows that when Jesus returns, the Lord will cast him into hell to suffer there for all eternity. He wants to take down as many people as he can before that day comes. He doesn't want the gospel to reach any unbelievers. And he wants us to despair and think that God won't forgive us or to figure we're good people and God will take us to heaven because we deserve it. If we think either of those things, he wins. We will go to hell.

So he fights against us. He does have power in this world. He throws obstacles in our path. He makes our lives hard physically and emotionally and spiritually. And day after day, he whispers temptation in our ears. He tells us that God didn't really say all those things that our pastors tell us he did. And even if he did, we're smart enough to sin without really getting hurt. We're smart enough that if we sin, we'll get away with it and we'll even enjoy it. Then when he gets us to sin, you know what he says? He tells us that God will never forgive a rotten sinner like us. What kind of Christian do you think you are? He wants us to turn our back on God and live in sin or to despair and give up our faith.

If we had to stand up to him alone, we wouldn't stand a chance. In the first hymn we sang this morning, Luther wrote, "*The old evil foe, now means deadly woe, deep guile and great might are his dread arms in fight. On earth is not his equal.*" But we don't stand alone against the evil one. We stand behind Jesus. He came with a new teaching, the teaching of the Son of God, a teaching that has his authority. Just as Jesus told that demon to shut up and get out and the demon had to obey, so today, Jesus tells the devil to leave us alone. He promises to guard us and protect us and to bring us home. He says that nothing can snatch us out of his hand, not even Satan himself. Again, Luther says, "*He's judged, the deed is done, one little word can fell him.*" What is that little word? Jesus. Christ defeated the devil when he rose from the dead. Jesus crushed Satan's head when he took our sin away and gave us eternal life.

Jesus defeated the devil when he gave us faith. Day by day, he works through the gospel to comfort us and strengthen that faith. Every time he forgives us, every time he promises to protect us, he strengthens the faith that will bring us home. So we don't have to be afraid of the devil anymore. We don't have to constantly look over our shoulders. Jesus is on duty. His power and authority terrify the devil. He will use that power and authority to bring us to eternal life. That's what this new teaching is all about. Jesus has authority. He is the Son of God. He will guard and protect your faith until you stand with him in heaven. Amen.