

**Sermon: Serious Business**

New North Church, Hingham

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28 January 2018

Based on **Deuteronomy 18:15-20; Mark 1:21-28**

This week's Gospel reading continues from last week's passage when John the Baptizer got himself arrested and Jesus called his first disciples. So far in Mark, we have witnessed Jesus' baptism, but we skipped over the Holy Spirit driving him out into the wilderness. Last week, of course, we saw the beginning of Jesus' ministry along the shore of the Sea of Galilee. So, what do you do after you call a few disciples? You get to work.

That's something Jesus knows how to do. In Mark's fast-paced account, in the first acts of his public ministry, the young man from Nazareth makes a strong impression. So far, so good – 'at once his fame began to spread.'

But look a little closer. 'When the *sabbath* came, he entered the *synagogue* and *taught*.' This story takes place in sacred time in a sacred place – synagogues were like churches: the word could mean the people or the building. A synagogue was a place to study Torah and receive religious instruction from the scribes. It's perfectly natural for Jesus to go directly to a synagogue, although, later on, Jesus is rejected in a synagogue, and he never goes into one again.

Today is the sabbath. Is it okay to teach on the sabbath? Is that work? Maybe. No one complains or criticizes Jesus for it, and he taught with authority. It was *how* he taught that astounded everybody, not that he was teaching in the first place.

But just then, 'there was in their synagogue *a man with an unclean spirit*.' How did he get in there? Don't they check you at the door? In this context, 'unclean' means something opposed to 'holy,' or something imperfect or out of order. So, this unclean spirit and Jesus are opposites, and the demon recognizes Jesus, rightly, as the Holy One of God.

Knowledge of someone's true name was thought to give you power over them. At the burning bush, when Moses asked God for a name to bring back to the Israelites, he didn't get a straight answer. But this demon knows Jesus and yet has no power over him.

Is it okay to do an exorcism on the sabbath? I guess so: everyone was amazed.

So, what is this? A new teaching! With punctuation! Flexible punctuation, anyway. Another legitimate way to read this verse would be: 'What is this? A new teaching! With authority, he commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him.'

Everyone in the synagogue was astounded by his teaching – by his knowledge of the Torah – and amazed at his command of demons. Jesus clearly demonstrated his authority over both earthly and supernatural things. The scribes, his disciples – they all must have thought, this is the man for us, because at once his fame began to spread.

The passage from Deuteronomy is part of a long discourse from Moses. He knows he won't make it into Canaan, so he tells the people everything they need to know about God's will, and that's why Deuteronomy is important. In the absence of Moses, the people will need a guidebook.

This particular section is concerned about who comes after Moses. He assures the people that God will raise up for them a prophet like him, and they better listen up. The people, having witnessed God in action *once*, begged Moses not to let that happen again, and Moses reminds them of that here. God agrees with them – yes, the people need an intermediary, someone from the community who knows them. But it's tricky – it has to be the right prophet.

How do you know? How would we know whether God has commanded a prophet to speak in God's name? Who gets to speak and act on God's behalf? Your idiot neighbor who won't return your lawnmower? Someone you barely know from across town? I've known some great teachers, but I have yet to witness an exorcism anywhere, let alone in church. Should we keep that in the job description?

Moses said the Lord will raise up a prophet like him; God *will* do it. But we must determine that what we see and hear from that prophet might actually be what God wills.

This is Mark's concern too. He puts Jesus square in the middle of the prophetic tradition: John prepares the way; the Spirit descends upon Jesus, and he proclaims the kingdom of God is at hand. Then he demonstrates his power with an act of compassion.

Modern-day prophets are few and far between. We might not notice them even if we tripped over them. One such man, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., felt there was a real need for prophecy in the struggle for civil rights. He said, ‘Every minister of the gospel has a mandate to stand up courageously for righteousness, to proclaim the eternal verities of the gospel, and to lead [people] from the darkness of falsehood and fear to the light of truth and hope.’

He also knew what to expect – threats and intimidations, inconvenience and unpopularity, physical danger – in the service of letting justice roll down like waters. He called it a ‘hard challenge and a sublime opportunity.’ He said, ‘If the *church* accepts the challenge with devotion and valor, the day will be speeded when [people] everywhere will recognize that they “are all one in Christ Jesus.”’

Remember, even Moses shied away from such work, at first, and he did okay.

He did okay because the people listened. It took forty years in the desert to make a nation, and it’s been fifty years since Martin Luther King spoke about prophecy, neglecting, though, to include himself.

God has given many words that need to be heard. We know the challenge to being the church: feed the hungry; clothe the naked; give shelter to the homeless; love your neighbor; do justice; walk humbly, carefully, with the Lord. Jesus shows us that his authority lies in his willingness to serve, to be compassionate, and to build God’s kingdom here on earth.

Amen.