

**Sermon: In Capernaum**

New North Church, Hingham

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

Reading the Gospel is like math – it’s cumulative.

Very briefly, this is what we have heard from Mark so far: Jesus, the Son of God, acquired divine power at his baptism through the Holy Spirit as he was coming up out of the water. John the Baptizer got arrested and faded from the scene, at which point Jesus began his ministry in Galilee by calling his first four disciples, who seemingly gave up everything to make a total commitment to God’s good news.

In the reading from Deuteronomy, Moses taught that God provides the leader and the words spoken. This passage looks forward to the time of Joshua and after him, perhaps, to the Judges. We can say that it looks forward to Jesus too. And we are called to listen thoughtfully for God’s Word spoken faithfully.

And now we find ourselves in the synagogue in Capernaum where Jesus is preaching and teaching ‘with authority.’ Capernaum will become the center of Jesus’ ministry in Galilee.

At this point in the story, we’re the only ones who know that Jesus is the Son of God. But then he and his disciples meet a man with an unclean spirit. Somehow, *he* knows Jesus as the Holy One of God – meaning one filled with the Holy Spirit, and not the unholy spirit of demons.

In the ancient Near East, knowledge of a true name or identity was thought to give one power over another. We see this in Genesis when Adam named all of God’s creatures (2:19-20) and again when Jacob won a wrestling match against an angel and asked for his name. The angel didn’t give it but renamed Jacob instead (32:27-29).

Most famously, God gave Moses an alias he could use if the Israelites asked who sent him, saying, YHWH: ‘I AM WHO I AM’ (Exodus 3:13-15).<sup>1</sup>

The point is the demon knew Jesus’ name. He knew him as Jesus of Nazareth, the Holy One of God, a revelation of his true nature, and Jesus rebuked him for it.

Did no one else in the synagogue perceived anything about Jesus at all?

Not only did Jesus preach and teach in the synagogue, but he did it ‘with authority.’ In Judaism, divine authority is conveyed through the Torah. For Mark, it is conveyed through Jesus.

Every Jewish adult male had the right to get up and speak in the synagogue. Visitors could preach too, but only at the invitation of the rabbis and scribes. Jesus apparently did not wait for an invitation. This is something we will learn about him if we haven’t learned it yet. Jesus doesn’t say things like, ‘Oh, have you considered this?’ Or ‘May I suggest to you...’ Or even, ‘It seems to me that...’ Instead, Jesus pronounces; he proclaims; he commands. And he acts.

The authority that Jesus used to call four fishermen on the beach is present in the synagogue in his teaching and in his power over the demonic elements of human life.

So, what, exactly, was it that Jesus preached in the synagogue? We can’t know for sure – probably something about God’s kingdom being at hand – but it doesn’t matter. The focus is on his authority.

This also happens to be a healing story as much as it is about authority.

In Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus said, ‘Ask, and it will be given to you’ (7:7).

In Mark, Jesus does not initiate healings – the ones to be healed either come to him or they are brought to him, or they appeal to him for help. In some way, the afflicted initiate the healing, and Jesus delivers it.

When demons speak to Jesus, they remind the audience of his divine authority. Demons add a cosmic level to the story, so it makes sense for this to be the first healing story in Mark. In this one, Mark shows how the healing started and the result, but has no interest in the details of what is essentially a miracle. Jesus commanded and the demon obeyed; that’s all we need to know.

The demon, Jesus’ enemy, knew from the beginning that it was defeated, vanquished without a struggle. And even though demonic powers continue to influence the world, the characters in the story cannot see that Jesus has already won.

They *are* amazed, though, but ‘amazement is not faith.’<sup>2</sup> Those in the synagogue – all except for the demon – might not perceive Jesus’ true identity but they *do* authentically respond to his authority, which is the beginning of faith. So, there’s hope.

The late William Goldman, author and screenwriter, wrote a book called *Adventures in the Screen Trade*. In it, after explaining how certain films become hits and others sink without a trace, and after talking us through the essential structures of story, he concluded that “Nobody knows anything.”<sup>3</sup> We can say the same about what happened in Capernaum the day Jesus arrived.

Like any church on any given Sunday anywhere in America, the synagogue is a place of public worship and prayer. It is a place of tradition and ancient teachings and rituals. And it was in such a place that Jesus encountered a man with an unclean spirit.

Jesus liberated this man from whatever it was that afflicted him. In a world that seems filled with demons of every kind everywhere we look, who speaks and acts with that kind of authority today? Who speaks with the words of God in their mouth? And who would presume to say that they do? Do we know what the demon knew about Jesus of Nazareth, or are we just listening in?

If we move the scene from the first century synagogue up to our modern-day church, we will still find people who cannot perceive Jesus; we will still find those who oppose him; and we will still find Jesus willing to assert his authority as the revealed Holy One of God.

The authority that Jesus asserted is not power in the way a politician might understand it, but his willingness to care for the poor in spirit. This is the good news of God’s kingdom that Jesus brought with him to Galilee and it’s the same good news that he offers to us today and every day.

Of course, it would be amazing to see that God is at work in the world through a Word that brings healing. That would be completely unexpected in our messed-up world. Yet, it is this Word that guides the church to create space for freedom and to be a place of healing, communion, and fellowship.

We are still in chapter one, still at the beginning, still learning about Jesus.

Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> I AM WHAT I AM, or I WILL BE WHAT I WILL BE, or even, I AM THE ONE WHO MAKES THINGS HAPPEN.

<sup>2</sup> Boring, M. Eugene. *Mark: A Commentary* (Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, 2006), 65.

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/film/william-goldman-screenwriter-who-insisted-nobody-knows-anything-dies-at-87-1.3700317>