



“The Source of Authority”

Text: Mark 1:21-28

a sermon by Kevin Fleming

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FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH - EVANSVILLE, INDIANA

When I was a junior in high school, on the day after Christmas, a movie was released that shook the world. People lined up around city blocks to get into theaters. Reports were that viewers were passing out as they watched the movie. Church leaders were in an uproar over the movie. The box office went wild. “The Exorcist” was an unimagined hit, though pea soup sales did dip a bit.

We’ve got a real life exorcist story in the opening of Mark’s gospel. Jesus was in Capernaum, the home of Peter, Andrew, James, and John, and he went to the synagogue – the remnants of which are still there. He was preaching on the Sabbath, when a sick person burst into the assembly. Those gathered there, in those pre-modern medicine days, with no idea of psychology or psychiatry, immediately diagnosed the man as being possessed by an unclean – even evil – spirit. That did not deter Jesus. He told the unclean spirit to leave and the man convulsed, screamed, and returned to a more normal attitude and demeanor.

And everyone who was there was amazed. They couldn’t believe their eyes. This was something they had never seen before. “He teaches with authority!...He commands even the unclean spirits and they obey him,” they said. And, of course, Jesus’ fame began to spread.

We’ve got a lot to do in worship this morning, so an extensive unpacking of that story will not be possible. But, let’s take high-level view of this story, because there is something we need to understand clearly if this story is to make any difference in our day.

We're in the beginning of Mark's gospel – the first gospel that was written. It is the briefest of the four gospels and it forms the framework for Matthew and Luke's gospels. There is no birth story of Jesus – he just shows up at the Jordan River to be baptized, goes into the wilderness to be tempted for 40 days, comes back to Galilee and begins preaching, calls four fishermen to be his first disciples, and then goes to the synagogue in Capernaum, where we find him in our lesson for the day. Mark has told us that Jesus' message is that the Kingdom of God – or the Realm of God – is at hand, but we aren't told exactly what that means.

Until we get to Capernaum and the synagogue and the possessed man.

In this opening story of his gospel, Mark is telling us what Jesus' mission is and what it means. Jesus has come to establish the Kingdom of God – the Realm of God – and that realm is one of wholeness, justice, peace, healing, hope, and all of those positive things that Jesus is about to put on display for all people of all time.

But that will not be easy, because opposed to the Realm of God is the Anti-God realm. It focuses on brokenness, disunity, fracturing, prejudice, injustice, enmity, fear, and all of those things that have the power to distort the image of God in us and cause us to live in ways that are diametrically opposed to the ways of God.

By casting out the anti-God presence in the life of the man in Capernaum, Jesus – in Mark's gospel – establishes his mission. Jesus is here to tear down the Realm of the Anti-God and restore the Realm of God – the vision for life in which God created the heavens and the earth and everything in them. Jesus is here to bring wholeness out of brokenness, hope out of despair, peace in the face of fear, joy in the midst of tears, and unity even as voices seek to divide and separate.

What was the source of Jesus' authority? It was not the government. It wasn't the religious establishment. It wasn't polls or popularity.

The source of Jesus' authority was God's eternal word. The source of Jesus' authority was the God of the Patriarchs and Matriarchs, the God of the Exile, the God of the Covenant, the God of the prophets. Jesus wasn't speaking and acting on his own authority. Jesus was speaking and acting with the authority of God.

Today, in our ordination and installation of new officers for this congregation, we will place some in our number in places of authority. Not one of the people being ordained and installed today asked for this to happen. Through the voice of this congregation, God has called them to particular work in this particular time. They will face challenges and choices, some of which will be especially difficult.

But, let's be clear: their authority does not come from the act of ordination or their installation on a board of the church. Their authority does not come from the number of years they have been members of this congregation. Their authority does not come from how much they give or how often they volunteer.

The authority of every church leader – teaching elder, ruling elder, deacon, and trustee – comes from God and every church leader must be constantly committed to discerning what God is calling us to do and where God is calling us to go.

But they are here, leading us into partnership with Jesus Christ to establish the Realm of God here-and-now. They will lead us in confronting the Realm of the Anti-Christ – all those powers and persons who would lead us away from God's way and onto a far lesser way. They will lead us in healing brokenness, setting right the injustices of our world, caring for the overlooked and under-recognized, speaking for those whose voices can no longer be heard, calling for compassion and righteousness when it seems to be lacking, and in all that they do, they will work to lead us out of darkness and into God's marvelous light.

Now, having said all of that, I have probably scared a few of them away. Church leadership is a daunting responsibility. So, I'll ask all of you to pray for them every day. Encourage them in their work. Be interested in what is happening at the church and through the church. Surround them with your love and uphold them with your encouragement.

And remember this: when Jesus was returning to God after this resurrection, he said to the disciples, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go..." In essence, Jesus said, all the authority I have I now give to you. Please do something with it.

Let's do something glorious. For now and evermore. Amen.



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