

## FOURTH SUNDAY AFTER THE EPIPHANY

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The Rev. Robert G. Eaton, Interim Rector  
All Saints' Episcopal Church, San Diego, CA

From Mark chapter 1, beginning with verse 25, “Jesus rebuked him, saying, “Be silent, and come out of him!”<sup>26</sup> And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him. “What is this?”, they said with amazement. “With authority he commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him.” Many things to consider, but let’s focus on this one thing today, Authority.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

One of the many things we could talk about from this passage today is how much it is an intentional part of the Epiphany message and theme. Its not only about casting out unclean spirits, or as Mark would identify four verses later after this reading in vs 32, demons, but every action of Jesus which brought this Power to the World, and the World in curiosity and need to his Power and Authority. So in our reading today, Mark says, “And at once his fame spread everywhere throughout all the surrounding region of Galilee.” That is Epiphany, the manifestation of Jesus Christ to the World for the purpose of salvation, and every other work of being set free from what ails you.

You can read the reflection I wrote for this Gospel as it was posted Friday. I reflect there on the existence of these unclean spirits.

The biblical teaching and theology that allows this action of Jesus is about Authority. With some help many years ago from a colleague, Mike Feazell (2003 to be exact), and on this day of Annual Meeting, which has Authority matters built into it, and your search for that new leader with the authority of ordination, let’s focus here.

The teachers of the law didn’t speak with their own authority. They necessarily prefaced their comments with something like “There is a saying that...” or “Rabbi Such-and-Such said...” Even the prophets rightly gave credit for the words given to them for their pronouncements to “Thus says the Lord...” But, now, here is Jesus teaching in the synagogue saying simply, “I say to you...”

Here was a man who spoke with his own authority, not in the name of another. That alone was amazing. But if that were not amazing enough, Jesus demonstrated his authority when he told an evil spirit what to do, and the evil spirit obeyed.

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In Jesus' day, evil or unclean spirits were considered, even by many Jewish teachers, to be numerous and powerful, literally seen everywhere and infecting everything, and doing whatever they could to inflict trouble and suffering. When someone seemed to be possessed of a demon, the exorcists, whether Jewish or pagan, used complicated magical rites and spells to compel the demon to leave. We see this described with Simon Magus in the book of Acts. The power was in the magic, it was believed, so whoever knew the right incantations and ingredients and methods could use them to bring about the unseen conditions that would manipulate the spirit world.

But Jesus was astonishingly different. When the demon-possessed man disrupted the meeting, Jesus simply yet forcefully ordered the demon to leave, and it left. The people in the synagogue had never seen anything like it. Who could have such authority that even the evil spirits have to obey his straightforward word?

Unfortunately, unclean spirits are still with us. This mention of exorcists has come up in the Episcopal Church just this past week. An old friend and fellow presbyter from the Diocese of San Joaquin, and now the bishop of the diocese of Springfield, announced his appointment of a diocesan exorcist. Just so you know, this priest will not be using incantations and magic, but will rely upon the very authority of Jesus Christ to carry out his ministry, hopefully required infrequently. I can tell you, not many bishops would do the same, and also be brave enough to announce it. And sadly a few will see this as absolutely irrational and superstitious. I've sent my congratulations and encouraged the good Bishop to send this priest around the diocese unannounced. But again, it's not about the priest exorcist, or the bishop, it's about the authority to proclaim in the authoritative name of Jesus Christ.

**Let's say this, it's about exercising authority, not being authoritarian**

Jesus, the Son of God, had all the authority in the world—in the universe. God created all things through him and put all things under him. So even these spirits that turned evil, though he allowed them to exist, were completely subject to him (see [Colossians 1:16](#); [Ephesians 1:20-21](#)).

Yet Jesus did not use his incomparable authority the way we humans tend to use our little straws of authority. Shakespeare wrote, "Man, proud man, drest in a little brief authority." For many humans, authority becomes merely a means of enriching oneself, of getting one's own way, of manipulating and suppressing the truth, and of getting and holding the power to keep doing those things. Witness history's parade of totalitarian regimes, corporate, executive, government and ecclesiastical scandals, tyrannical parents, bosses, clergy, teachers, government officials and the like.

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Not so with Jesus. He has all the authority there is, yet he uses it entirely differently from the way many people would. Let's look at a few examples:

1. He took action when necessary. Jesus did not stifle normal living by trying to prevent all possibility of something going wrong. He didn't post sentries at the doors to keep all potential demon-possessed-looking people from coming in. He simply dealt with the problem decisively when it arose.
2. He didn't overreact. Jesus didn't make a Broadway production out of making the demon leave. He didn't knock the demon around for a while, tell it off for 10 minutes, scream at it, kill it or declare war on all demons. He just made it go. Hey, I'm not saying that WE don't have to do that to fight the demons; I'm just saying, this is the authority of Jesus.
3. He didn't crow about it. Jesus didn't use the incident to further his image. He didn't print up flyers and bill himself as the one who tossed out the demon.

## The second thing we can see is about Servant authority

Jesus uses authority to serve, not to be served. And that is how he wants us to use whatever authority we might have. Whether our authority is at home, at work, or somewhere else, he wants us to use it to help others, not to make ourselves into big shots.

Later in Mark's Gospel, Jesus explained it to his disciples like this, "You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" ([Mark 10:42-45](#)).

What a difference it makes when the authority we're subject to is a blessing instead of a curse. "When the wicked rule, the people groan," says [Proverbs 29:2](#). It is when authority is used to help, not to overpower, that those under it can rejoice. Wow. Rejoicing in authority!

Jesus doesn't overpower us to make us knuckle under. He serves us with patience and mercy, helping us grow to see how much we need him. Sin is a cruel, harsh, manipulative, unforgiving taskmaster. Jesus is compassionate, gracious, patient, loving and merciful, although willing to be tough like with these unclean spirits, or at his temple cleansing. The authority of sin is fraudulent, but the authority of Jesus is absolute.

So then, let us Walk with Jesus

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When it comes to the authority of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, in our lives, how do you think he uses it? To help us, or to lord it over us? Many of us live as though we think Jesus uses his authority to lord it over us. We assume his love for us is conditioned on how well we behave. We feel discouraged and fearful that God no longer loves us when we fail to measure up in our obedience.

But Jesus uses his authority to help us, not to destroy us. He drives out the demons, not us. And literal evil spirits are not the only kind of demons Jesus has authority over and drives out for us. Sin itself – which is real and so very destructive -- is an enemy that does us damage and lords it over us. So are our fears and our doubts.

When our sins and fears start a commotion, it's time for us to take them to the one who knows how to handle them. We can take them to Jesus in prayer and confession, and trust him to know what to do.

We can apply this authority and our questions not only to ourselves, but every institution, like this parish. So keep that in mind in your ongoing prayers. But it's the same questions: What's your enemy? What habit, what sin, what fear plagues you, saps your courage and energy? What has you beaten down, enslaved? Whatever it is, it cannot withstand the authority of Jesus. When you give these battles to him, the complexion of the war changes — the enemy is on the run. When you stand close to Jesus, these enemies can't have the last word and can't push you around. When your attention is on Jesus, they don't seem so fearsome, so strong, because Jesus puts them into perspective as the puny little weaklings they really are. In Jesus, you are bold and strong, and these bullying, fast-talking fears and sinful habits are weak and insignificant.

Why not take your needs – and our parish needs - to Christ? Give your problems to him and trust him to see you through them. He's there for you, now and always.

Amen.