

## ***Epiphany Encounters: #4 “Unexpected Authority”***

Sunday, January 28, 2024

Mark 1:21-29

The fourth Sunday after Epiphany

*Jesus brings healing and God’s presence to a person suffering from an unclean spirit, demonstrating the unexpected power of God.*

It struck me the other night that preaching about exorcisms on the same day when the congregation reviews my salary may not always send the right message. But I guess you know what happens when you stop making payments to your exorcist. You’ll get repossessed.

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He enters a synagogue, on a Sabbath, and teaches.

Yet he teaches in a way that is unexpected. Jesus' sermon isn't distinctive because it is punctuated with cute illustrations about kids or analogies from football. The crowd's gape-mouthed expressions tell it all: he teaches them with authority, a word could also be translated as "power."

This is what is at stake in Mark's Gospel. God's power confronts human struggle. God is breaking into the world, ready to battle with the powers of evil. And that battle will continue straight to the cross.

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"What do you have to do with us?"

Evil, in whatever form it takes, pushes back against the power of God. It resists the goodness of God, rejects any claim of God's sovereignty over all creation. It denies possibilities of grace and wholeness, of healing, and transformation. What's mine is mine, cries the demon...Jesus you stay on your side of the synagogue.

But, remember: it's Jesus, in the synagogue, on a sabbath. Suddenly, he's going to become that preacher who isn't just preaching: he's meddling.

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But is that not what God is doing? God sees the evil that grips humanity. God sees the forces that bend us, twisting us so that we cause harm to each other and to ourselves. Like those possessed by evil spirits, these unclean powers pin us down, and mold us into their image. Yet we are made in the image of God. We are loved by God, made for joy and acts of love. Yes, Jesus is meddling in the synagogue. And he calls us to join him.

It feels to me that the biggest temptation of life in a divided world is to see that God's power is no longer at work. That somehow we cannot trust love to bring healing. It feels as if we are called to reject love in favor of power, compassion in exchange for efficiency, or grace for greed.

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This is a super-hero battle par excellence. Jesus comes to the synagogue out of his calling to proclaim the reign of God. This is indeed what astounds the people of Capernaum first. I suspect they showed up that day with rather low expectations – you know, a guest preacher, some new kid right out of seminary. He won’t be like our regular rabbi, but we’ll managed to get by somehow. They settle into their seats, unsure and uncertain if this new guy is going to be worth their time.

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Suddenly, the focus shifts again. A man who has struggled his entire life with what was then called a demon makes eye contact with Jesus. He's been sitting at the back of the synagogue, listening to this new teacher. He is, in fact, probably like any one of a number of people we know who has wrestled either privately or publicly with intense emotional pain and suffering. It has torn into the fabric of his soul, ripping him out of community. He has been abandoned and labelled as unclean—and his presence in this place is in fact pretty shocking.

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Woodlawn Chapel Presbyterian Church – Sermon by Rev. Dr. Chris Keating 1/28/2024

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