

“*And So It Begins*, A Sermon in Five Part:
Part Three: Some One! Some Authority!”
Preached at Knox United Church (Parksville, B.C.)
on January 29th 2012 (Fourth Sunday after Epiphany)
by Foster Freed

Mark 1: 21-28

Beginnings are important...beginnings are of vital importance: especially to those of us formed by a faith-tradition whose opening words speak of what God was doing *in the beginning*...a tradition which later goes on to speak of a Word that was with God *from the beginning*. Beginnings are important...important, in part, because a beginning often defines the nature of that which will follow. Beginnings are important...beginnings matter.

In the case of Mark's Gospel...in the case of the book that is thought by most scholars to have the right to lay claim to the honour of being the very first of the Biblical Gospels...in the case of Mark's Gospel—as we saw last Sunday—Mark launches his Gospel with dramatic abruptness: supplying us with neither an infancy narrative ala Matthew or Luke, nor with a poetic prologue ala John. Indeed: having depicted—in quick succession—the ministry of John the Baptist, followed immediately (immediately being one of Mark's most characteristic words!), followed immediately by the baptism of Jesus at the hands of John, followed immediately by the temptation of Jesus in the wilderness, Jesus' proclamation of his fundamental message, and finally by the calling of his first four disciples, Mark then depicts...

...Mark then depicts what might well be described as a typical handful of days in Jesus' Galilean ministry, more specifically his town-of-Capernaum ministry. And it's a ministry...

...a flourishing ministry I hasten to add; one commentator describes this section of Mark's first chapter as the “honeymoon phase” of Jesus' ministry...

...it's a ministry that begins—as does so much else in Mark's Gospel—with dramatic abruptness. Jesus, according to Mark, takes Simon Peter and Andrew, James and John, heads with them to the neighbouring village of Capernaum, and begins to teach in the local synagogue. The onlookers are astonished with his teaching and speak of the authority with which he has addressed them. On cue, they are joined by a man being tormented by an unclean spirit; Jesus commands the spirit to leave the man, who is immediately healed. Once again the onlookers marvel: *What is this?* they ask! *A new teaching—with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him.* At once notes Mark...at once his fame begins to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee. No wonder...no wonder that shrewd commentator describes this as the honeymoon phase...the honeymoon phase of Jesus' ministry. To which I hasten to respond that it is an episode that will strike many, if not most of us, as representing anything but a honeymoon. More like a headache...more like an embarrassing headache...than like a honeymoon.

The problem, of course, the problem has to do with that pesky demon...and with talk of demons that fills much of the New Testament, but which plays an especially prominent role in

the Gospel according to Mark. Indeed: if 20+ years in the ministry of the United Church of Canada has taught me anything at all about the people who tend to occupy United Church pews, I have come to recognize that even a hint of the thought that someone is entitled to claim, echoing Flip Wilson's beloved Geraldine, that "the devil made me do it": even the faintest hint of that sort of sentiment is guaranteed to cause great waves of discomfort to erupt in pews that will be instantly marked as anything but comfortable. And while it may be the case that we United Church types tend to remain cautiously open to the prospect of encountering an angel or two as we journey through this life of ours, talk of demons (for the majority of us) is a bridge too far. The problem being...

...the problem being on a morning such as this, that the demons play a far from incidental role in the Gospel according to Mark. Indeed: the very word Gospel—which is an English rendering of the Greek word, *euangelion*, from which we get words such as evangelical and evangelism—the very word Gospel comes from a family of words that have to do not just with any proclamation, not just with any old announcement, but specifically with the announcement of a great triumph. A great military victory! And the fact is: Mark frames his entire Gospel as a duel between Jesus and the forces of evil, a duel that begins auspiciously: first with Jesus triumph in the wilderness, then with the calling of four disciples to participate in Jesus' encounter with the demons, and finally with this very first episode at Capernaum, in which Jesus cleanses a demon-tormented soul. As one recent commentary on Mark explains:

Mark consciously places this striking set piece near the outset of Jesus' public ministry, just as Matthew leads his Gospel off with the Sermon on the Mount, Luke with the inaugural sermon in the Nazareth synagogue, and John with the wedding feast at Cana. Each evangelist thereby tips his hand as to what, in his mind, Jesus was, and is, all about. In Mark's case, it is "clearing the earth of demons." In Mark's case...in Mark's case...Jesus—above all—is about "clearing the earth"...clearing the earth of demons. But what in the world...what in the world are we, some 2000 years later, possibly to make of that?

Well...suffice it to say that, having lived with the disjunction—the disjunction between the demon filled world of Mark's Gospel...and the psychic world most United Church folk occupy in the late 20th and early 21st century...suffice it to say that the one thing I no longer feel compelled to do with this sort of material, is to wade into the dicey area of comparative worldviews, in order to convince you that your worldview ought to be more like the worldview held by Mark. Speaking personally, I have no choice but to confess that I am one of those—I suspect I'm in the minority—who does, in fact, give credence to the actuality of a transcendent realm in which spirits that wish us harm jostle side by side with those who wish us only blessing. And yet, I am no longer convinced that my job is to change your minds on that count, if for no other reason than there is so much more to discipleship than adopting a particular worldview, a particular philosophical orientation. While it may be the case that certain worldviews (say the one that tells us that this is a "dog eat dog world") run counter to the underlying spirit of the Gospel, holding to a particular worldview is no guarantee that I will be even vaguely Christ-like in my day to day walk with God. More to the point, my hunch is that a protracted debate, this morning, as to whether or not to take the whole notion of a demonic realm with even a vague hint of seriousness, will distract us from the far more important point this morning's text is attempting to make for us...a point that is bound up with the word that

really and truly *is* central to Mark's point this morning. The word I have in mind? The word to which I refer?

Authority! As in: ...*for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes.* Authority! As in: ...*what is this? A new teaching—with authority?* Because the key for us this morning lies not in what the scribes may or may not have been able to bring to bear in that Capernaum synagogue...

...besides, as one scribe speaking about other scribes, have a little compassion for a scribe today: go ahead and hug a scribe today; the problem with scribes, you see, is that they start to think that it's their job to own the tradition whereas, in fact, the job of a scribe is to let the tradition have them!...

...the key for us this morning lies neither in the activities of the scribes nor in that of the demons, but in the authority, the unique authority brought by the One who taught and cleansed in ways that caused the people of Capernaum to marvel...in ways that continue to cause the world to stop in its tracks and marvel.

Then again! Then again!

Before we get too caught up in *our* marvelling, let's recall just how problematic that word "authority" really and truly is. We live in a world...we live in a world in which authority is continually being misused. Nothing is more terrifying than when we find ourselves in the presence of those who have authority, but who are clearly determined to use it for their own benefit rather than for the benefit of those with whose well-being they have been charged. Nor is there anything quite so irritating than having to deal with someone who has loads of authority but very little competence, or someone who has considerable power (the Greek word being used here can be translated either way, either as "power" or as "authority")...someone who has considerable power, but lacks the wherewithal to use that power wisely. Indeed: if truth be told, very few of us have made it through life without having been forced to deal—at least occasionally—with someone whose authority threatened to impact our lives in an unwholesome way. Exousia...that's the Greek word...exousia, power, authority: those are words that point to a realm of human life that is fraught with danger...that is fraught with the possibility of great harm...with the possibility of horrific abuse.

And it's here, I think...it's here that it may just be safe for us to glance, ever so briefly, in the direction of that tormented soul...that demon possessed soul. Because surely we can all relate to what it means to be bound by destructive forces, even if we give no credence whatsoever to a demonic realm! We know what it means to be at the beck and call of those who mean us harm: and we know what it means to be set free from their power over us! We know what it means to be captive to paralyzing fears, relentless depression, and deep-seated anxiety: and we know what it would mean for us to be set free of such destructive forces. Nor are we strangers to the slavery of addiction, as well as the all-too-rare moment of victory when the addict is blessed with the freedom to turn their back on that which has made them their prisoner. The point being...

...the point being that while we may have different ways of conceiving the realm that holds human beings captive to destructive behaviours...

...and while Mark's way of conceiving that realm may be radically different than our way of conceiving that destructive realm...

...where surely we can agree with Mark, is that the authority with which Jesus Christ enters our world is an authority we can celebrate precisely because he utilizes *his* authority to release the captive soul, to set the prisoners free: in effect using *his* freedom not to diminish the freedom of others but precisely to confer on others the fullness of human freedom for which God created us in the beginning. And so when it is claimed—as it was earlier claimed—that the Gospel of Mark, from the outset, seeks to depict Jesus as the one who cleanses the earth of demons, we can translate that by stipulating that Jesus is the One who comes to cleanse the earth of those countless things—those myriad forces—that seek to undermine human freedom, human purpose, human wholeness. And surely...surely...for that we can give thanks.

Beginnings *are* important...beginnings *do* matter: in part because they so often define the nature of that which is to follow. The fact that Mark...the fact that Mark...at the start of his Gospel, is eager to depict Jesus not only as One who comes bearing unique authority, but as One who uses that authority to cleanse and heal and restore a human being to the fullness of his humanity....the fact that Mark presents such a story at the head of his Gospel, is of exceptional importance for us as we seek to understand this Jesus, this authoritative Jesus in whose footsteps we seek to follow.

And I am struck, struck by the roots of that word "authority": if not in the original Greek, in the language most of us claim as our native tongue: English. After all: the word "authority" is related to, derives from, the word "author". Someone, you see, has authority, to the extent to which they can claim either to be the "author" of the action, or to be in synch with the intentions of the one who has "authored" the action. And surely...surely whatever it is we may be seeking to claim about Jesus during this season of revelation...this season of Epiphany...surely that's at the heart of each and every one of our claims. That he comes into this world in deep harmony—in deepest possible connection—to the One who authored this world in the beginning, the one whose ultimate mandate for creation this Jesus seeks to further with his every word and his every deed. And we are called to embrace him: to embrace him and—perhaps more importantly—to give him the opportunity to enter our lives with an authority that yearns not to lord it over us, but to set us free: free for life, free to love, free that we might, in turn, offer that same freedom, that same love, that same life to others.

And so it begins. In Jesus' name! Amen.

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