

Our Gospel lesson from Mark is a weird story of an exorcism in the middle of a synagogue teaching. At first glance, it is hard to see how this incident has any application to our lives today. Can you imagine someone here right now standing up shrieking, convulsing and speaking in voices as depicted in this morning’s scripture? I certainly don’t claim to have either the authority or power to cast out evil spirits. So what’s a preacher to do with a passage like this?

Well, my first tack was to take the intellectual route. I read a very interesting commentary on Mark titled *Say to This Mountain: Mark’s Story of Discipleship* by Ched Myers. Myers says that this is the first “miracle story” in Mark. The modern debate over whether or not we can “believe” in such stories is not only misplaced, but it fails to address the function of this kind of narrative. Firstly, in ancient times, the possibility of such miracles were never questioned. Secondly, for Mark, the significance of the miracle laid not in the *act*, but in what that act *symbolized*.

Right before this exorcism story, Jesus had just spent forty days in the wilderness margin of society. After recruiting some disciples, Jesus has now moved into the heart of the provincial Jewish order: the holy time and space of a local synagogue on the Sabbath. In the synagogue were scribes. Scribes had knowledge of the law and could draft legal documents (contracts for marriage, divorce, loans, inheritance, mortgages, the sale of land, and the like). And the “law” in Jesus’ day was the Law of Moses, the Torah, the Jewish religious law. Scribes had legal and religious authority, especially in the synagogue setting.

Notice how Mark frames this exorcism story. In verse 22, Mark writes: They (the worshippers) were astounded at Jesus’ teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes. The essential issue and conflict in this story is defined and framed as the contest over authority between Jesus and the scribal establishment. Within this frame, Mark inserts an episode of an “unclean spirit” who protests Jesus’ presence: “What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us?”

Myers asks: Who is the ‘we’ on whose behalf the demon speaks? The function of Mark’s framing device suggests that the demon’s voice represents the voice of the scribal class whose “space” Jesus is invading. The synagogue on the Sabbath is scribal turf, where scribes exercise authority to teach the Torah. The “spirit” personifies scribal power, which holds sway over the hearts and minds of the people. Only by breaking the power of this spirit is Jesus free to begin his compassionate ministry to the masses, starting in verse 29.<sup>1</sup> For Mark, this “exorcism” symbolized the power of Jesus’ authority over the authority of the professional religious leaders of his day. SO, how does this connect with everyday life?

Several years ago, I was personally confronted with a powerful teaching. Alan Hirsch was the main speaker at the Virginia Baptist General Assembly. Hirsch is a missiologist, a person who studies the message and mission of the Christian church. Hirsch noted that churches are declining all over western societies. He argued that most of the problems in the church today are a result of a failure in discipleship. In the Gospels and the book of Acts, the mission of disciple-making set the agenda for the church. But today, we’ve got it backwards. Today, Hirsch argues that we place a greater priority on building the church -- its programs, buildings, and staff -- than following Jesus. And “mission” is not something that the whole church does. Instead, it is relegated to a committee who do these things in a few places.

At this point, I was squirming in my seat and getting resistant and defensive. Parts of me became agitated. My identity was threatened because all my life, I thought I knew what it meant to be a good pastor: fill the pews, increase the budget and add exciting programs to draw more people into church. But Hirsch was telling me that

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<sup>1</sup> Ched Myers, *Say to This Mountain: Mark’s Story of Discipleship*, p. 13-14.

I had it all backwards: leading like Jesus was about making disciples first, participating in God's mission second, and then letting God's Spirit build God's church. The emotional part of me was getting scared. All my life I've kept people at arm's length, and now Hirsch is telling me that I have to open up my life? Why can't I just tell church members to "Do as I say, not as I do?" The people-pleasing part of me was getting depressed, because recruiting disciples the way Jesus did it would open me up for criticism that I'm just playing favorites and choosing my cronies to be part of a discipleship group and rejecting others. The professional part of me was threatened because my salary package was over one-quarter of the total church budget, and the church I was pastoring contributed less than five percent of that budget toward missions. Was Hirsch saying that I'm part of the problem?

It was then that I came to realize that I'm part of the scribal establishment! My identity, my livelihood, my sense of worth, were all wrapped up in my authoritative position as a pastor, a modern-day scribe. Those voices of my emotional, intellectual, professional and personal identities were shrieking in my head like evil spirits, and they were all screaming, "What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us?"

In that *kairos* moment, I realized that I was possessed. I was possessed by the power of professional ambition, by the power of intellectual pride, and by the power of approval-seeking. I realized that I needed a Teacher with the power and authority to perform an exorcism on me. To "exorcize" is to "drive out" to "cast out" an evil, unquiet spirit. I needed someone with real authority and power to drive out those voices so that I could be in my right mind, which is another way of describing repentance. I needed to unlearn old ways and habits so that I can be freed to learn from and imitate the Holy One of God.

On that day, I believe that Jesus did exorcise me from those evil spirits. I would love to say that I'm totally free of them, but the truth is, I am not willing to totally let them go. I like to think that they have less of a grip in my life, and I hope naming them in front of you today is another step for me toward complete freedom. Here's the truth: the more Jesus' powerful teaching penetrates my life and my identity, the less power those other spirits will have over me. The more I live out Jesus' teachings, the more authority I will have when I teach them.

The Greek word for "authority" is *exousia*. *Ex* meaning "out" (like "exit") and *ousia* meaning "essence." Jesus taught with a power that came out of his very essence, instead of relying on outward credentials, reputation, and status. A person's authority comes from living out their message, living an authentic life, people like Mother Theresa and Martin Luther King, Jr. They are true prophetic voices in our time, because their words came out of their essence. When they spoke in God's name, their words had authority, because they feared or revered the Lord in their lives. Their lives revealed the truth of what the Psalmist proclaimed this morning, "The fear...the reverence...of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom."

I pray that the power of the Gospel will not only be *communicated* by the words I say, but just as importantly, it will be *demonstrated* by the life I live.

So enough about me. I'm eager to get to the fun part of the sermon. I'm going to stop talking about my life and start meddling in yours! What would it look like if Jesus were to show up this morning and interrupt my ramblings, in order to speak a word of power and authority into your life, today, right now?

What would Jesus address in your life that has a grip on you like an evil spirit?

What voices need to be quieted and silenced?

What damaging behaviors need to come out?

What unquiet spirit needs to be exorcised from your life today?

May the words and demonstration of Jesus' powerful teaching release us out of our bondage and into the freedom of God's glorious grace! Amen.