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Year B  
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## **AS ONE HAVING AUTHORITY**

### **MARK 1:21-28**

Because I said so! Has anybody ever answered so boldly when you asked why? Or perhaps more embarrassingly, have you ever answered a question so brashly?

Answering a question this way assumes a hierarchy. Because you said so...well...who do you think that you are? More poignantly, who do you think that I think you are?

An observation: churches that profess to be part of one body are capable of setting up hierarchies. Churches that have bishops acknowledge this openly; churches that are congregational or Presbyterian are more subtle. Somehow human beings forget that Jesus Christ is the head of the church; may God forgive us for forgetting...

Of all the auto accessories that are sold in Jesus' name, the one that drives me the wildest is the classic bumper sticker that says, "God said it, I believe it, that settles it!" I am with Quoth the preacher, the teacher, the rabbi who wrote the Book of Ecclesiastes: "Vanity! Vanity! All is vanity!"

God's authority is not contingent on us. If God says something, that settles it (whether you or I believe it or not); and it is quite possible that some of us who speak on God's behalf are not, in fact, speaking for God.

Answering a question "because I said so" is exactly one pronoun away from saying "because God said so..." Be careful out there, because confusing one statement with the other takes place effortlessly whether the authority being asserted is yours, ours or God's.

That which is authoritative answers that “why” question in that litany of questions rehearsed every time that a decision is being made. It is the ultimate question, and yet it is the one that does not appear on the engraved invitation that arrives in the mail. Who? What? When? Where? University Presbyterian Church is sponsoring Empty Bowls on Wednesday, February 18, in the fellowship hall, but why? Because human beings are hungry...because not enough attention is given those who are hungry...because the church has a food pantry to run...because God says so...because of all of the above...

In Mark’s Gospel, transitions are abrupt. The contrasts between one paragraph and another are instructive. The disciples are just off the boat from which Jesus calls them when Jesus leads them into the synagogue. Hmm...fishing for people starts here? On the Sabbath, in the synagogue, Jesus holds court on the subject of fishing.

Then there is the phrase that I find impossible to ignore: “...he (Jesus) taught them as one having authority,” and Mark feels compelled to add “not as the scribes.” One would expect to find Jesus in the synagogue since he was baptized by John. Every other person in the Gospel of Mark is “astounded” by what Jesus does, but his teaching---as one having authority, unlike the scribes---stands out.

Jesus’ authority is different. It is not conferred by the synagogue, an interpreter of Jewish law, presbytery, the session or its moderator. Another observation: Jesus’ authority is asserted by the strength of his teaching and not by what he says about himself. He seems to be answering the “why” question without saying, “I am the Christ. I am better than you. Torah says it...I believe it...that settles it. Because I said so, or even, because God says so.” Jesus taught as one having authority, and in so doing, God’s glory is revealed, and all flesh, at least the flesh gathered in the synagogue, see it together.

Mark follows up setting Jesus apart from those nasty scribes with another abrupt transition. In the midst of Jesus’ lecture, a man with an unclean spirit barges in and cries out, “What have you to do

with us?” He is obviously afraid and confesses his fear: “Have you come to destroy us?” In parentheses: I know you. “I know who you are, the Holy One of God.”

Who is this person who makes a spectacle out of himself at church? One possibility is that he is a scribe. Look closely at how the sentences are structured. Mark is clear: “Jesus taught them (the disciples) as one having authority, and not as the scribes.” Period, next sentence: “Just then there was in the synagogue a man with an unclean spirit.” Speak of the devil...

And that’s another possibility. If the man is not a scribe, then perhaps he is the devil himself (or at least a man inhabited by a demon). Mark is only two paragraphs removed from Jesus being tempted in the wilderness by Satan, and I suspect that evil smolders, like smoke from a candle’s wick after the flame has been extinguished. Even though Jesus survives his wilderness experience, it is probably safe to say that his tempter still burns with resentment, despair, pride and envy.

Jesus recognizes the unclean spirit, the demon, because he has faced one before. If you have ever wrestled with a demon, you probably know when you meet someone who is wrestling with the same one; and if you have ever suffered because of another’s person’s demon, you probably recognize that demon when it afflicts somebody else.

The demon in this story has no more authority over Jesus or his disciples than do the scribes. The unclean spirit recognizes Jesus. About this, Mark is explicit, as the man afflicted by the unclean spirit proclaims, “I know who you are... (you are) the Holy One of God.”

But Jesus does not want to hear this. He rejects this affirmation of faith, this proclamation of the truth, because, as long as this person’s body is occupied by an unclean spirit, he speaks without authority. Thus Jesus says to the demon, to the unclean spirit, “Shhh...be silent, and come out of him!” And it does.

Scripture does not say whether Jesus whispers or screams. I interpret it as a whisper, because it seems to me that the ghosts, demons and unclean spirits that haunt human beings wiggle more when all

is calm and quiet. When there is no movement or noise to hide behind, the possessed has to confront his or her demons or be confronted by one who will.

If we interpret Jesus' rebuke as a whisper, the actual cleansing or exorcism is more dramatic. Jesus says quietly, "Be silent, and come out of him!" And the unclean spirit convulses and cries out (and Mark definitely cranks up the volume here), and the spirit---unclean, demonic or otherwise---is thrust out of this person's body, landing at Jesus' feet and flipping like a fish on dry ground.

Then, in what may be *the* understatement of Mark's Gospel, Scripture reports, "They were all amazed." Who is amazed? All of them: the disciples, the man formerly plagued by an unclean spirit, the spirit itself and Billy (or whoever cleaned the synagogue...after all, this is story about cleansing inasmuch as it is a story about exorcism). Since the New Testament says "all," I assume that even Jesus was amazed (in all of his humanity, he is certainly capable of being amazed). I do not know about you, but I find it strangely comforting that God finds grace so amazing.

The group's collective gasp is followed by interpretation. Ah, as soon as something amazing happens, the quest to explain it away begins. One person asks, "What is this?" And then another...and another...As Mark observes, "They were all amazed, and kept on asking one another, 'What is this?'" Committees meet. Consensus builds, and the Word proclaims, "A new teaching---with authority!"

Is Jesus a participant in, or merely a subject of, this discussion? The story shifts to the third person when speaking about him: He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him." He...that...the one over there...the one who speaks with authority...Jesus teaches. Jesus heals, and he teaches and heals through exorcism.

Now one final observation: Jesus says the same thing to would be disciples fishing on the banks of the Galilee that he does to unclean spirits in the synagogue, and that is, "Come." Come and follow me. Come out of him (and into me?). It foreshadows Jesus' speech in Matthew's Gospel in which he invites the disciples, in which he invites you and me: "Come to me, all you that are weary and are

carrying heavy burdens (like fish and unclean spirits), and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me (because I teach as one having authority).” No, Jesus would not flaunt his authority. His invitation concludes with a confession and a promise: “for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.” Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen.