

Sermon – January 31, 2021
“The Holy One of God”
The Rev. John C. Wright

Text: Mark 1:21-28

Pray with me: Father, let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Come, Holy Spirit, come, visit, fill and anoint the sharing of these words. Make them to be a blessing for your people, a blessing that leads to life eternal and fruitful labor as we tarry here on this mission field. Lord, come and astonish us with your word this day. Amen

Good morning and welcome to everyone. This morning, I want to celebrate the upcoming first meeting of the Good News Club for this semester and encourage everyone to pray for the meeting. Pray that children will be led to register and attend the meetings and that God will draw those who attend into a new relationship with Jesus Christ.

Four disciples have left their vocations, families, friends, and possessions and are now journeying with Jesus. Peter, Andrew, James, and John have answered Jesus’ call and are following him. Their journey becomes our journey as we also are able to follow Jesus as a disciple through the lens of the scripture. We are enabled by God’s word to experience some of what these disciples experienced as they began to walk with Jesus. Imagine that you have walked with Jesus from the lakeshore into the next town, Capernaum. This town may be the town where these brothers actually live, and it will be a home base for Jesus’ ministry in Galilee. It is a small town on the northwestern side of the sea of Galilee. Mark tells us that on the sabbath they went to a synagogue and that Jesus taught. It is the first stop on our journey with Jesus. A synagogue is not so much a building as it is a gathering of Jewish men. Any place that ten men gathered was considered to be a quorum and synagogue could be held. This is not a place where a hired pastor comes and shares the word of God. A synagogue in the first century was a place where the lay members, people of the community, gathered, and the service was led by those with some expertise in the scriptures of the Old Testament. This most often would have been a scribe who could read, write, and knew the Law found in the Old Testament scrolls. They would teach what the Law held and help those present apply the Law to their situations. The scribes had studied and learned the scriptures from teachers who were experts in the Law. Jesus goes into the synagogue and teaches. His teaching is not like that of the scribes who had taught before in

this synagogue. Jesus' teaching is with authority. The scribes teach about the Law, Jesus teaches about the kingdom of God. Jesus has not been taught the scripture through study. His teaching is as one of the prophets who received the words they shared directly from God. Jesus teaches with authority, a teaching that astonishes and unsettles those who hear it. This teaching is very different from what those in this synagogue and those who now follow Jesus would have heard. Jesus' teaching is something new, and its content threatens to upset the lives of those who hear it and the normal ordered life in Israel of scribes studying and then teaching the law.

Mark does not yet provide us with a summary of Jesus' teaching. The point he is making is not yet about Jesus' teaching, but that Jesus teaches with authority and his teaching impacts those who hear it by threatening their comfortable relationship with God's word. They have allowed Jesus to teach, expecting to hear what they have always heard, and with authority he teaches something different, something that threatens them, something that demands they act differently. In the midst of their unsettled response to Jesus' teaching, a cry is heard in the synagogue from one of the men present, "What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God." I suspect that after this cry came you could have heard a pin drop in the place where they were gathered. Jesus' teaching has not only touched and unsettled those present, but an unclean spirit is also challenged by Jesus' presence, to the point that it manifests itself through the unfortunate man it occupies and controls enough to speak through him. Jesus has encountered an unclean spirit in the synagogue. Unclean spirit is a favorite expression that Mark uses for what other writers will call a demon. It is a spirit that brings uncleanness to a human. It is a spirit that has evaded the control of the divine holiness and, as a result, its presence banishes humans from God's presence. Not only has Jesus' teaching unsettled the hearts of those listening in the synagogue, but it has also brought fear to a servant of Satan, and in that fear this unclean spirit has made itself known. We need to notice that Jesus interacts with this unclean spirit. He does not ignore it and leave it to speak and continue its control over one created in the image of God. We should also note that this is Jesus' first miracle documented in Mark's Gospel. Notice that the unclean spirit uses two names for Jesus, calling him "Jesus of Nazareth" and "the Holy One of God." The unclean spirit knows both Jesus' earthly name and his spiritual name. The unclean spirit recognizes Jesus for who he is, the Holy One of God." The unclean spirit also asks Jesus if he has come to destroy them before the time. This response tells us there are more unclean spirits loose in the world as the

unclean spirit's reference to others is plural. These unclean spirits recognize Jesus, and they know Jesus will destroy them, they just do not know the time. The use of names for Jesus is an attempt by the unclean spirit to gain control over Jesus, an attempt that is pointless and fails. Look at how Jesus responds to this attempt. He first silences the unclean spirit, then commands it to "come out." At Jesus' command, the unclean spirit is silenced and comes out of the man, causing a last cry to come from the man and shaking him as it leaves. Jesus uses no magic incantation, no exorcism as was used by others, no appeal to a deity or greater authority, just his command. Notice also that Jesus does not condemn the one who had the unclean spirit as a sinner. Jesus just sets him free from bondage as he exercises his authority over Satan's minions. If the men in the synagogue catch the names that the unclean spirit uses for Jesus and their implication for this new teacher with authority identity, it goes unmentioned by Mark. The point is that Jesus has authority over unclean spirits. At Jesus' command they are removed, they come out, and those once bound are free.

Mark includes the crowd's response to Jesus' authority for us in his Gospel. "They were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, 'What is this? A new teaching— with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him.' At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee." There are two points in their response that we do not want to miss. The first is that the crowd is amazed. This word has the idea that they are unsettled with what they have witnessed. There is a sense of fear in their response. What they have known, what has become comfortable for them, is challenged by Jesus. There is one among them who not only teaches with new authority, as one sent from God, but at whose command unclean spirits come out and those who were held are set free. The second point is that this news spreads rapidly throughout Galilee. People start talking about Jesus. They are wondering what is happening in their little corner of the world. They are unsettled about the changes that are occurring. They have a sense that something new is starting, and they are yet unsure of what it means for them.

What can we learn from the disciple's first day, their first trip to a synagogue with Jesus? It is hard to imagine what Peter, Andrew, James and John might be thinking at this point, and yet the day is young and there is more to come this day. They will be struggling to digest what it means to be with Jesus, one who teaches so differently from the scribes, one who has authority, one who seems to be sent from God. They also must be wondering what just happened with the

man in the synagogue. What does it mean for this man they now follow to command unclean spirits to come out and they obey?

Let's look at some applications to our lives today. First, Jesus' authoritative teaching is available to unsettle us today. This is the reason we study the New and Old Testaments, to learn Jesus' teaching. We study in order to grasp this "authority from God teaching" that Jesus brings, not to be those who are amazed by the teaching, but to become a community changed by Jesus' teaching. Jesus' teaching has the authority to transform us into a people of God. We should be seeking to fill our minds with it, to let it transform us and remake us into his very image. We are to seek to be those who have the mind of Christ and are ready and able to share his teaching in our actions each and every day.

Second, we should realize that here in the opening of Mark's Gospel, we find Jesus demonstrating his authority over Satan. The kingdom of God is breaking in and with it comes one who has the authority to command evil spirits, and at his command, they come out. Jesus does not question the existence of unclean spirits in this world, nor the reality of Satan. Jesus' response to their challenge to him is to demonstrate his authority over them, to demonstrate his command of them, and when he does, they speak to a coming day when he will not only command them, but will destroy them. This is great good news for those who believe in Jesus. Jesus' first miracle confirms for us that we are not alone in our battle with evil. In fact, the name the unclean spirit uses for Jesus, the Holy One of God, tells us that Jesus is one who can battle on a spiritual level. We now have an advocate, one who is present with us who will not leave us in the bondage that can come with an encounter with evil. Jesus is able, willing, and will not hesitate to command evil to come out and be banished from our lives. This encounter in the synagogue affirms for us, no assures us, that we are now following one who has the authority to bring about the kingdom of God. The beginning of the end of Satan's reign on earth is at hand. As the kingdom of God grows with the growing body of Christ, so does the reign of Satan shrink. We who follow Jesus, who are in his presence, need not fear the molesting of unclean spirits in our lives, if we will but follow Jesus. The casting out of the unclean spirit provides a powerful sign that the end to evil in our lives is at hand. The world and the evil powers that influence it are subject to the reign of God through Jesus Christ. God is acting through Jesus in the power of the Holy Spirit, and as He does, the unclean spirits in the lives of those around Jesus are banished and will be destroyed completely in time. This first miracle not only

announces that Jesus has come with new teaching, teaching in authority that is new to the world, but that God will act through Jesus in the individual lives of those who choose to follow him into freedom from bondage.

A key point in today's scripture for us is how Jesus responds to the presence of evil, evil that confronts him directly. We should note that Jesus does not step away from the conflict but stands fast in his authority and uses that authority immediately and decisively to confront evil. We should notice that this is not a physical evil that is in Jesus' presence, but it is a spiritual evil, an unclean spirit, that Jesus is able to command to come out. This could bring us to a discussion of confronting unclean spirits, but I think that discussion would steer us away from a key aspect of the insight we should embrace in this scripture. Notice that it is Jesus and not his disciples who confronts the unclean spirit. Their time will come later when they are also empowered by Jesus and filled with the Holy Spirit. We should realize, as Paul tells us in Ephesians 6:12, "For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places." No matter how you think of Jesus' encounter with an unclean spirit, it points us to this idea that Jesus has this authority to enter into this battle and prevail. Jesus does not turn aside when confronted with evil but drives it out and will destroy it. With Jesus' coming, this battle is joined and the forces of evil are engaged. We are the body of Christ and should be seen in this community as a place where evil is addressed. How can we do this? Are we to be those who are seeking to engage unclean spirits in this community? I think the answer to that is yes, we are the body of Christ and are to be at work as Jesus was when he walked the earth. Let me suggest one way that we can enter into this struggle against cosmic powers. I think our first and primary entry is through prayer. We are those who are on the ground in this community, and wherever we encounter evil, we should be a presence of prayer crying out for Jesus to come and engage on our behalf. We should be those who are praying that our hearts will be turned more fully to Christ and will become holy vessels that may be filled with the Holy Spirit. So, our first point of a prayer response to evil is to pray, "Come, Holy Spirit, come" and then, "Come, Lord Jesus, come." We should be those who are asking the Holy Spirit to push out any evil, any uncleanness, in our lives, and instead, to fill us with the pure love of Christ. As we begin to be those who are open to and are being transformed through the filling of the Holy Spirit, then we are to turn our prayers to our family, those in our house, and pray that we might

be transformed within that unit into a sharper, more loving, instrument of Christ. We need to seek to bring Jesus into our family relationships in a manner that allows his love to push out any discord, strife, pain, brokenness, and hardships and replace them with peace, joy, hope, and love. Next, we need to turn to prayers for our community. As we pray for our community, we need to realize that evil is at work around us, binding those in our community, binding them in chains of addiction, sin, brokenness, darkness, and hopelessness where they are held in bondage that controls their lives. Our prayer is to open the way for Jesus to enter into those conflicts, those battles, and bring his authority to drive out the presence of evil spirits from this community and replace it with repentance, peace, freedom to love, forgiveness, mercy, and grace. We are to be those seeking in prayer the breaking of the chains of bondage in this community. These are prayers where we seek to understand what foothold evil has found in our community and then ask Jesus to destroy that foothold and replace it with himself. We should be those who are looking around our community with the eyes of Jesus and seeking to understand what evil is at work, and then standing up against it in the power of Jesus, in the power of the shed blood of Jesus Christ. So, if your heart is unsettled this morning, take that as a call to prayer. Commit to pray throughout Lent and beyond, that God will fill our hearts with the love of Christ. Pray that God will fill our families with the love of Christ, and pray that Christ will open our eyes to the footholds of evil in our community that bind us and those we live with in this place. And then pray that the chains that are being used to bind our neighbors will be broken in the power and name of Jesus Christ. And, as our eyes are opened, pray that Jesus will drive out the evil that is present in this community and allow us to bring in the love of Jesus Christ through our presence into those places that had become refuges of evil but are now open vessels for the outpouring of the love of Christ. Pray all of this in the name of Jesus Christ.

Pray with me: Lord, come and do a new work in us. Let us be transformed by your steadfast love into your people. Lord, we open our homes to you that you would drive out any presence of evil there and replace it with your joyous, loving presence. Jesus, open our eyes to see, our ears to hear, and our hearts to be aware of the evil that binds those in our community, and then, as we name those bindings that you reveal, come, Lord Jesus, and break the bondage, free your people, and fill them with your love. Start with me, Lord, and breathe your breath on me fresh this day. Come, Holy Spirit, come. Come, Lord Jesus, come. Amen