

Pastor Dane Wood

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Jesus is off to the races in the Gospel of Mark. We saw him first baptized by John, then he was tempted in the desert, and then he called his first disciples. 4 fishermen, 4 hardworking blue-collar guys. So, they went to Capernaum and Jesus immediately started teaching. And its only verse 20 in chapter 1! Things happen quick, with a very immediate nature, in the Gospel of Mark.

The people are amazed at Christ's teachings because he was teaching with authority. What does that even mean? Did the scribes and priests not have authority when they taught in the synagogue? I would assume that the rabbis and leaders of the Jewish community would have been vetted, I assume had to get master's degrees and write long papers on the nature of God, and then get grilled by a board of other Rabbis who decide whether they are good enough... or maybe that's just us Methodists. Joking aside, there had to be a process and vetting, something that installed these leaders with authority, but apparently Jesus had some other authority he was working with. We need to take a moment to learn a bit more about the synagogue before moving on. In Jerusalem there was the Temple. This was the center of the Jewish world. It was where worship and sacrifice occurred, and it was the ONLY place where this happened. But not every Jew lived close to the temple, so they needed something else to hold those communities that were further away, together. So the law dictated that where you have at least 10 Jewish families, you will have a synagogue. The synagogue was not a place of worship or sacrifice. You did not come to it to praise God, so it's not exactly like a church. We gather this morning and Sunday mornings for worship, the whole hour is devoted to praising God... the sermon, right now, is not about any of us, it's about God, and we just happen to squeeze in some other things. Synagogues though were different and were places devoted to teaching and discipline. Scribes and priests would teach on the Torah, the Law. It was a place where the community council would meet and decide things, and it was a place where news about the Temple would be shared. It was more like a Library and Town Hall than it was like a church. (Now as an aside, perhaps we should be working harder to make the church both Synagogue and Temple, but that's a discussion for another time).

So what was so new and authoritative about Jesus? When the scribes or Priests taught, they always heavily referenced or quoted stories, scriptures, or prophets. I wish I could hand out one of my history or theology papers from school, and show you what I mean. When you write an academic paper in higher education, most of the paper is quotes and references to other authors. Every paragraph is essentially 3 things: A sentence introducing a quote or reference, then the actual quote, then a sentence saying why that's important. My own opinion does not show up in my papers until the very end. The concluding paragraph might have a small section on my own thoughts, but the rest of the 20 pages of writing is all a collection of other authorities. That is how the scribes and priests in a synagogue taught the Torah or Law. If you were to ask them, "Priest, how were demons created?" They would answer, "Well, let me tell you a story about the Nephilim. In the Torah, in Genesis (6:1-6), we are told that some angels lived among us and bred with women. But the world became evil and these offspring remained in this fallen creation and still dwell among us today. This is said because the Prophets John and Joe have said so, the Rabbis Jimmy and Bubba agree, and we find it in the law."

This is a very formal way of teaching. If you notice though, the priest never once told us his opinion, he just tells us what a bunch of other people said and what the scriptures say. It's sort of impersonal and not always helpful. Jesus was teaching in a different way. His authority was his own and he shared himself as he taught. So, for example, if someone were to ask Jesus that same question, "How were demons created?" I imagine he might answer like so, "Well, we are told in the scriptures of a time when the angels lived among us and bred with women, and that time was evil. Do you not still see evil in our world today? We have lost our way, and we have created demons amongst ourselves because we have strayed from the Law of God and broken our relationship with our Father and with each other. This I believe to be so."

Now this is my own imagination making the words here, but I believe it to be authentic to how Christ might have answered. This answer may not seem like a big difference, but it was in the ancient world. Today when I or someone else preaches, we try to mix the styles. I do my research and learn what I can, referring to past authorities on occasion, but certainly building off of them. But I also had my own interpretations and opinions, feeling led by the Holy Spirit to claim that authority and teach as Jesus did. But this was new to them, a line was being crossed. The Law was no longer some object held in a vault in Jerusalem for only a select few to read and

interpret. Now Jesus was bringing it to the people in the countryside, with a fresh interpretation, a renewed passion. It was unheard of and radical, it was a wall being torn down between God and his people.

The story carries on with the first miracle Jesus performs in the Gospel of Mark. Other Gospels tell us that the first miracle was Jesus turning water to Wine at Canaan, but Mark... he wants you to see something different. Firsts are important. We all want to witness our kids first steps, or hear their first words, we want to have our first car forever, our first love... first anything really. We like Firsts, and that's no different here. So what is the First miracle of Jesus in the Gospel according to Mark? Jesus performs an exorcism.

A man is in the synagogue while Jesus is teaching and makes a scene. He calls Jesus out and questions him, and Jesus has none of it. He commands the spirit to silence and casts him out. So not only is Jesus teaching with authority, but now he's healing and exorcising demons.

Demons are a fun topic, one I personally love talking about. They are so taboo and edgy. Are they real or not? Did God create them? Where did evil come from? Who is this Satan guy? So many things to think about when it comes to demons. But... for us today, we need to remember one thing. It does not matter what we believe about demons at this moment. What matters, is that in the time of Jesus and Mark, they believed in demons as a VERY REAL thing. That story I referenced earlier from Genesis 6, the ancient Jewish people did have a long explanation based on those scriptures that explained the source of demons. The idea that Nephilim were fallen angels living on Earth. Demons were powers that could harm a person in any number of ways, be it bad luck, sickness, mental issues, infertility, miscarriages, bad harvests... you name a bad thing, there was a demon for it.

Demons were a way of understanding the separation between God's perfect and good creation from the horrible fallen, human world in which we reside. God was seen as incapable of evil actions by this point in the Jewish tradition, so things that we could not understand, and that we perceived as evil, were attributed to Demons. We have to remember that this was before science really even existed. People knew next to nothing about health and medicine. Knew nothing about meteorology and horticulture, as sciences. It was all trial and error and very few things were ever looked at and examined in the way we do today. Today we know a great deal about diseases and medicines. We have physics and chemistry to tell us how the world works.

But ask any scientist, and we still know next to nothing about it all. We've dropped the word demon and replaced it with scientific explanation. But... do demons still exist today?

I think so. Demons are things that separate you from God. Sin is that action that breaks our relationship and Demons are the things that do it. When someone goes to the doctor, the doctor will not say, "You have a demon because your knee doesn't work and you're only 25." No, they say you have juvenile idiopathic arthritis and that the cartilage is gone and your bones are deteriorated. But the demon is still there. At the edge of our Diagnoses are despair, loneliness, fear, doubt, guilt, grief, and a host of other pulls that steal our joy in life, our hope in Christ, and our faith in the Truth of God's Word. (Seymour) The demons show up in that way now, pushing us away from God, dragging us down. Alcohol can be a demon if it separates you from God and family. Smoking, drugs, sex, money, anything that gets between you, God, and your neighbor, those are demons... and they are VERY real.

But... there is good news in Mark. Jesus has come to cross barriers and bring God to places that we thought God could not go. Jesus teaches in new ways, bringing the truth, and he heals those we thought were lost. A demon possessed person was sent away from the community, made to live outside the walls. They were shunned and cast out. This man was violating the synagogue and Jesus was removing the walls in just talking to him, even more so in healing him.

Even today people with demons are shunned, we cast them aside as if they were not human. We think less of people who suffer from addictions, we often falsely characterize them as people who ruined their own lives. We push them away and ignore them, not wanting to see them among us. But we are called to break down walls. Mark tells us how Jesus exorcises demons first (and will bring it up over and over again) because Mark is trying to show us that we are called to do it as well. Exorcism is not only for the Catholics and Horror Movies. We send Despair to hell with encouragement. We fight loneliness with companionship, Fear is conquered with prayer and knowledge. There is a cure for every demon that plagues our fallen human forms, it is Christ... The Love of God compels our unclean spirits to leave us when we work to embrace Christ. Those of us here are not the only ones who need it though. How will Christ find those who need healing, if his body, his church, his people, us... do not go and bring them hope. And not only bring them hope, but bring them back home, to the body of Christ with us.