

Competing Voices

Mark 1:21-28 (January 31, 2021)

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²¹They went to Capernaum; and when the sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught. ²²They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes. ²³Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, ²⁴and he cried out, "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." ²⁵But Jesus rebuked him, saying, "Be silent, and come out of him!" ²⁶And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him. ²⁷They 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." ²⁸At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.

Historical Context

In Mark and elsewhere we find Jesus often teaching with a directness which drew on common life experience rather than derivatively by interpreting scripture. This had the effect of shifting the power base of knowledge from the experts (in scripture, scribes) to the common people, who all knew about common life experience. It was a different way of doing theology, which democratized the process.

Theme: Competing Voices

We encounter multiple voices in life, and are constantly discerning which one to listen to. Sometimes, when there is a high noise level around and within us, it's not such an easy task. In Mark's gospel we're being schooled to learn to recognize the distinctive voice of Jesus the Son of God. We learn it through what he talks about, through what he doesn't talk about, and through his actions that speak louder than words. We also learn about who Jesus is by listening to the voices of those around him. In today's passage, we hear several voices.

We hear the voices of the synagogue-goers. They express how impressed they are with Jesus' authoritative teachings. We hear the voice of the unclean spirit. It is ironic that an unclean spirit is the first one to voice his recognition of who Jesus is: "I know who you are, the Holy One of God" (1:24).

The unclean spirit is scared. We can hear it in his voice. The quavering beneath the bravado. The unclean spirit recognizes the sound of the real enemy's voice. The real enemy of chaos and sin is Jesus. The enemy of the unclean spirit is Jesus.

When that which is sinful and unclean in our lives recognizes that Jesus is coming too close for comfort, we resist. That goes for individuals and communities. We react with uneasiness. Maybe it would be best if we named our central anxiety and remembered the saving Authority of God's voice. The One whose voice and presence can drive out our demons and set us free. Amid all the competing voices we hear, we should listen to his.