

Mark 1:21-28

In his succinct style, Mark follows Jesus' pronouncement of the Kingdom of God, and the calling of the first disciples, with an immediate and bold demonstration of Jesus' power and authority. Jesus goes directly to the established center of faith in an observant Jew's life - teaching and exhorting the Torah during Sabbath synagogue services.

What concerns the gospel writer here is not the content of Jesus' message. We are told nothing about what Jesus said or what texts he read. For Mark the significance of Jesus' teaching is the authority with which he speaks (v. 22) and the power of his words, different in tone and texture from the traditional interpretations of the scribes. These professionals followed established scholarly procedures in interpretations of the Torah. They debated points of law along familiar schools of thought. In Jesus' day scribal interpretation was intellectually demanding, but not expected to be spiritually surprising. Therefore, if Jesus was speaking "not as the scribes," not along the known and comfortable parameters of biblical exhortation, then his words would surely have stirred up the sleepy congregation at Capernaum.

Just how deep the stirring became evident when, on this first venture into his public ministry, Jesus was confronted by a frightened "unclean spirit." Terrified of a new word from God, this demonic being had thus far been able to live nicely in the comfortable status quo of the synagogue. Fear of this new authoritative voice calling for a fresh interpretation of a faithful life stirred the spirit into speaking, thus betraying its presence to Jesus. Mark makes sure we understand the cause for the intensity of the demonic spirit's fear by quoting its outcry directed at Jesus, "the Holy One of God." As James would put it later, "Even the demons believed and trembled" (James 2:19).

With this outburst the unclean spirit seals its own fate. Invoking the very authority the spirit feared, Jesus orders the demonic spirit out of the man, re-ordering that man's very being with his words. It is noteworthy that this dramatic change in the man's self is not a simple or smooth transition - there is great "convulsing" and "crying out" (verse 26) that necessarily accompanies the changes wrought by Jesus' words. Witnesses present are "amazed" and whisper uneasily about the implications of Jesus' power and authority for their own lives.