

St. Mark's Episcopal Church
Hazard, Kentucky
Sermon for January 29, 2012 ~ Epiphany 4b
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When we give another person the right to act on our behalf, we say that person is “authorized” or “has authority” to do so. When we read from the King James Version of the Bible, we are reading from what was long called “the Authorized Version.” When we are seeking answers to a complex problem, we frequently turn to one who is known as “an authority” in that field. When we are in need of law enforcement, we call “the authorities.” A man who was upset walked into a diocesan office and demanded to speak to someone with a little authority. Someone in a purple shirt overheard him and said, “I have about as little authority as around here as anybody. Would you like to talk to me?”

These are examples of ascribed or derived authority: that power or ability persons have because it has been given to them by others or, in some instances, earned among the pursuits of others. But we see a different kind of authority in today's gospel.

When Jesus launched his campaign after the calling of his disciples, the people in the Capernaum synagogue said his teaching had “authority behind it.” That is a different kind of authority. The Greek word used in Mark's gospel is *exousia*, meaning “out from himself.” So, here at the beginning of Jesus' ministry, Mark says he already has authority – not given to him like the knowledge of the scribes, but inherent in him. The teaching of the scribes was supported by what they had read in the law or what had been said by the great rabbis whose commentaries constitute the oral tradition. Jesus, on the other hand, was himself a source of information. He was an authority because his knowledge was not totally derived from scripture or the teachings of others. It was beyond scripture and tradition. It was first-hand. He spoke and proclaimed not simply what he read to be true but what he knew to be true. Someone has said, “He did not live in the prison of quotation marks.”

It is this authority that characterizes his teaching throughout the Gospel according to Mark. There is good news to be found in the manifestation of divine authority.

When God's authority is recognized, it brings about change. That is to say, it is so powerful and dependable that it captures the person who recognizes it. Each of the gospel writers uses his own unique style and mechanism for doing his job. For Mark, people respond to Jesus, but they really are puzzled as to why. Jesus' messiahship is kept a secret until the very end. But, there is an exception. Mark uses demons and miracle stories in the way that Matthew and Luke use parables to explain things. Jesus' divine authority is recognized by the demons, by the forces of evil, and by his opponents. Their supernatural authority and power is challenged and defeated by Jesus as he exorcises them.

When the demon possessed man cries out at Jesus in the synagogue it is because the demon knows who he is and realizes he has come to take charge. He has come to overcome evil with good. So, he calls the evil by name and exposes it and casts it out. The man is suddenly changed. Because the people saw what he did, they, too, were changed and his reputation spread rapidly.

There are demons of a sort in this assembly today, just as there were in the assembly in Capernaum. And, if someone came here and cast one out, before your very eyes, you'd find that amazing, too,

wouldn't you? But don't think God's authority is in question because such a dramatic event doesn't happen. God changes things even today in the lives of people where the light of divine authority shines into the darkness of their lives. When God puts the spotlight on evil and injustice in any form, things begin to change. It is true of individuals and of societies.

And, Divine Authority ultimately prevails. Centuries before Jesus, Moses said to the people, "The Lord your God will raise up a prophet from among you like myself and you shall listen to him." Mark acknowledges Jesus as the very first "teaching prophet" since Moses. The great difference is that while Moses said, "thus saith the Lord," Jesus said, "I say unto you." Long after some had given up hope and others thought they had taken all God's authority from him, in his own good time, God fulfilled his promise and his authority prevailed. It prevails in every generation because it is not dependent upon acknowledgment. That's an humbling thought, isn't it? Contrary to the widely used verse, Christ *does* have other hands than ours to do his work. While the method he prefers for spreading his good news certainly includes us, if we falter, he will raise up others to do what we cannot or will not do. And, when we are being faithful to our calling and run out of energy or inspiration, we turn to him and by gracious means he restores us and does with us what we cannot do for ourselves. If Christ's work in the world were dependent upon us, we wouldn't need him in the first place. In baptism we are grafted into Christ so that we will draw strength from his life as the branch draws strength from the vine in order to bear fruit. Apart from him, we can do nothing. His authority prevails, even over our mistakes and our inclination to try to do what he calls us to do without him.

This authority validates the church's mission. The difference between a church and a sect is that while a sect is made up of people who join together according to shared opinions and beliefs, the church is a God-given, God-sustained, passed-on institution. Jesus organized the Church, gave it its mission, ordained its ministers, sent the Holy Spirit into it, and promised to preserve it for all time against threats from within and threats from without. Even the powers of hell are not strong enough to defeat the Church because, as our Gospel for today clearly shows, the power of God is not intimidated by even the most evil of spirits. You and I are stewards of that authority, the power of which is not in its might but in its authenticity.

Sometimes, as Mark indicates, the battle is waged in the synagogue. Even the structures of religion may house forces that oppose the gospel. When the authority of Jesus was manifested in the Capernaum synagogue, word spread rapidly. Today, when his authority is manifested in this Church, when it is recognized as the beginning and end of what we do as a congregation, when we turn over control to him, his reputation will surely spread in this community, too. Then the word we speak will have the stamp of his authority upon it. Then the actions we take will have the seal of his authority on them. Then his authority will validate, bless, and give success to the mission we've been called to undertake.

His broken body and his spilled blood reveal the ultimate authority of the gracious life of the Sovereign of the Universe. And, to think, he invites us to this banquet so that, living under his authority, empowered by his grace, we may go into the world to act redemptively on his behalf. His authority, not what we can scrape together for ourselves, is the only valid authority in our life together as his people. Let us not be perplexed by it, but rather, let us rely upon it. Turn to it and be sustained by it. For that, my dear friends, is what makes us a holy people. It is not we, but Christ at work within us, who makes the difference. He has marked us as his own forever.