

## Leaving False Promises Behind

By: Keith Holste

February 1, 2015. Each of the gospels presents a slightly different aspect of Jesus. In Mark, Jesus speaks and acts with authority and has come to make a difference in the world. Pastor Keith's sermon today is about Jesus' first public appearance in Mark 1, casting out the demon from the man with an unclean spirit, and how his forgiveness also breaks into our lives and lets us have a new start.

\*\*\* Transcript \*\*\*

We hear our text this morning as we begin in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

We hear of Jesus in one of my favorite towns, Capernaum, in the Holy Land. These days it's a peaceful town. It's on the north shore of the Sea of Galilee. The hills rise up above it to the north and to the east and to the west, and it's surrounded by very few trees but lots of nice grassland. You can imagine the hills above it where Jesus did a lot of his preaching, and the lake nearby where the disciples did their fishing. You can see the foundations of the house where Peter's mother-in-law was at, where her house was. You can go to the ruins of the synagogue pictured on our bulletin today, probably where Jesus actually was -- if not on that level, just slightly below it. But you can be in the place and see what he would have seen. In those days it wasn't, though, a very sleepy town. It was a major center in the day of Jesus. It was on the major caravan route between Egypt and the East. It was a governmental center and it was a place of taxation. Matthew likely hung out there collecting his taxes. You can still visit the olive presses there where they would crush the olives for the oil, and end up growing commerce and growing agriculture in the area. And it's not far from Nazareth, and so it's easy to think how Jesus would have left his more remote home in Nazareth, came to the center of activity in Capernaum, and begun his ministry there.

Today we hear how he made his entry there. He was a visitor, having been actually someone from Nazareth. But he comes to the synagogue in Capernaum on the day of worship. That wasn't necessarily such a big deal itself. Any male is eligible to get up and speak in the synagogue and address the group. But what Jesus said and what Jesus did created a big stir. The speech was not ordinary. He captured the attention of the people. They said he spoke with authority. He wasn't like the other speakers they had. As I understand it, the Jewish tradition for speaking in worship is to build the kind of theological case based on those who have gone before. By quoting one and another respected rabbis from the past, they would build their speeches. But Jesus was different. He spoke on his own, not quoting the others. He knew the past, and often he would speak of the prophets of the past, but he usually took them to show that he was one with them and that their mission was his mission. Their words of promise and judgment were coming true in him.

I think it's helpful here to know that the Greek word for "authority" -- which the people said he spoke with: authority -- is "exousia," which means "out of one's being." "Exo" is "out of," and "usia" is "who you are," or "what one's being is." So to speak with authority is to come out of oneself from the authority that lies within. I think we all know people who have that kind of authority. It comes from within them, and people respect these people and look up to them because of the quality that comes through that person. It's different than just holding an office or a position and because of your authority that someone else gave you to make some pronouncement. Sometimes that authority comes from within, and that's what Jesus had. We've all known people who have, by their nature, inspired our trust

and our respect. When they speak, their wisdom isn't something quoted from the past. It comes from within them. Jesus was special. He didn't just quote, he spoke the truth.

This was the first time in Mark that we hear Jesus speak in public. He had been baptized, he had been tempted in the wilderness, and he had chosen some disciples who were fishermen. But this is the first public appearance that he makes. It's sometimes said that you can tell how a gospel is going to end, what kind of quality the gospel will have, by the first public thing that Jesus does in the book. And it's kind of a tip-off by the author, by the writer, of what that book is going to be about. In Matthew, Jesus very early on teaches the Sermon on the Mount. And the teachings of Jesus are very important in Matthew. In Luke, Jesus has a very nice sermon in his hometown, but he talks about helping people who are poor. And this makes the townspeople nervous. He says he has this power within him, and they decide they want to go kill him -- which is what happens to him in the end. In John, his first public appearance is changing water into a whole lot of wine, showing the abundant love and care of God. And that theme follows through the book of John. But the main thing Jesus does in this first appearance in Mark is to perform an exorcism. Jesus not only speaks with authority, but he uses his authority to cast demons out of a person. This was very different than a usual Sabbath day speech. This was new power being shown. So early on in Jesus' ministry we see how he comes to the world to make a difference. It won't be like it was before. The old, the evil is being cast out and cast aside, and he brings in the new.

A few weeks ago we heard of his baptism. We heard mentioned how the heavens were torn or ripped apart. We tore a curtain up here with the kids to show them. So things were being torn apart in a new way. Something new is breaking into the world. The very first words of Mark's gospel are the beginning of the good news. Mark is doing all he can here to let us know that Jesus is breaking into the world in a powerful new way, to make a big difference. Things shouldn't be the same with Jesus in the picture. He comes to get rid of evil and to bring good news instead. He comes to say that we're not bound by the demons that possess us and they may be thrown off.

Years ago at a confirmation camp in Iowa, Penny and I would sit at the noon hour with other pastors who were there. And one of the pastors had gotten back from doing time as a missionary in Malagasy. He told how on his circuits, when he'd go around to the churches there, new people would show up. At some of the gatherings people would stand up from the group who were possessed with demons, like the man we heard about in our gospel today. And it was no surprise really to have this happen; sometimes more than one. And it reminded us that in the presence of the gospel, it seems like those who are possessed by demons can't stay seated. They have to react to it in some way. They know there's a higher power there. They must either leave or submit to this power. They react to this power of the goodness of Jesus Christ, the good news of Jesus Christ being preached to them. Culturally, we don't have that happen too much here anymore. We don't let that spirit come out and speak in opposition to Jesus. We don't have people doing that this morning and most mornings, thank goodness. But we do know the power of evil and the temptation that comes with it, and how it leads us in a way that counters the way of Jesus. And that's so even though we may not have people standing up and saying they have demons within them, we all have demons within us. We all have the devil within us. We have temptation within us, and we would like to have it exorcised from us. But it doesn't come out automatically just by a word from Jesus. We need to name it. We need to confess it. And then it can be forgiven as we bring it to Jesus and we hear Jesus' words of forgiveness to us.

Two weeks ago at the Youthquake, the main speaker was Jonathan Swenson. He acted out little plays or vignettes of Bible scenes. One of the stories was about a man who was demon-possessed (it wasn't our particular story today, but a different man who had a multitude of spirits in him) and had them

exorcised by Jesus. The main prop that Swenson used in his dramatic presentation was a chain. He had a five or six foot, fairly heavy kind of long chain. And he used it to good effect. His main point to the kids was: what are the things that keep you chained up? What are the things that bind you, as though you had a chain wrapped around you and keep you in yourself? That is, what kind of things do you let possess you and keep you chained up, which are not healthy and would counter the way that God would have you live? We know how many things seem to possess us and keep us chained up. Our diseases, our addictions, our anxieties, our losses, our sorrows, our attractions to other gods that we make up ourselves and we get attracted to them. Both the powers that keep us chained in, and the things we voluntarily allow to possess us, are encountered by Jesus. Some things like the pressures of work, or financial burden, or home life, or caring for another person which maybe seems endless, can feel like they possess us. They get us down. Others of us, we often allow other things to possess us. We find it hard to let go of these chains, the things that we voluntarily seem to be tempted by. They end up having a hold on us that we would like to get rid of. So we're stuck with things that bind us like chains.

Both powers of Jesus that amazed the people that day in Capernaum continue with him. The more Jesus displays his power of speech and the power of exorcising demons, more peoples raise up the question: what authority does he have to do these things? The first remark that day was, "What authority he has," but the longer he did it, the more they wondered, "Where does this authority come from?" And the more he does it, the worldly authorities get more and more upset with him. Finally, they say he's exceeded his authority. He's claimed too much power for himself and he's blasphemed God by doing this. And so they bind him -- not with a chain, but with other things -- to a piece of wood in the shape of a cross, and think that they had gotten rid of him. They think that they are exorcising him from their presence, just as he had gotten rid of so many evil spirits.

But once again, the spirit of God broke through from the heavens, made a new start in the world. It raised Jesus from the dead and raised the number of followers of his who heard the good news that Jesus was alive. Just as a tomb could not keep Jesus in, he breaks the chains of those who are possessed by various demons in their lives. He gives a reminder that he loves all, no matter who they are or where they have been. He promises a healthy way of life and a relief from depending upon false hopes in the world. Just as he exorcised demons, he forgives sins. His forgiveness breaks into our lives and lets us have new starts in our lives. He gives powers and abilities to ministries, so that those who are dealing with dependencies and losses or troubles may find those who have the ability to treat those who are living in a troubled world. They find counselors and others, who are able to speak with them so that they're able to leave these things that trap them behind and come to new life. This is the Jesus of Mark breaking into our world, giving us new ways to live. He gives us a sense of health, a sense of worth by his enfolding love. It comes and captures us and releases us from what we've been doing before. We can see what we've been trapped by: our own conceptions about race, or about gender, or about age, or self authority, or ethnicity -- areas where we haven't been fully open. A new age can break in for us. We can lay aside the chains. We can decide what's best for our health, and leave the false promises behind. As Jesus breaks in to make a new world, he breaks in for you and he breaks in for me, so that we might live anew as his disciples in the world. Amen.

Now may the peace of God which passes all human understanding keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

\*\*\* Keywords \*\*\*

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