



Westminster Presbyterian Church
 Knoxville, TN
 January 24, 2024
 The Rev. Dr. Richard Coble
 Sermon: "Teaching with Authority"

Mark 1:21-28 (NRSV)

1:21 They went to Capernaum; and when the sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught.

1:22 They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes.

1:23 Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit,

1:24 and 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."

1:25 But Jesus rebuked him, saying, "Be silent, and come out of him!"

1:26 And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him.

1:27 They 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."

1:28 At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.

"Teaching with Authority"

The people were astonished! Says the Gospel of Mark.

Maybe you like surprises.

Not me.

There is a Google sheet in our church's account – it lives only in the cloud but stays close to our hearts. It can tell you who is preaching every Sunday from now

until August of this year and what text they are preaching on. It is like a security blanket to me.

Give me a calendar filled out six months in advance. Give me a planning meeting for an event three months in advance. Write up an agenda to that meeting so I know what on earth to expect, and I am content.

I don't like surprises.

You know, I also used not to believe in demons. I looked at this text a few weeks ago and thought all about how I was going to rid you all of any superstitious belief in demonology with my sermon on this text. But then, *surprisingly*, a foot of snow fell on our house. I stayed 10 days locked in it with our two children, subzero temperatures outside. When they weren't climbing up the walls, they were arguing with each other: 10, 50, a hundred times a day.

I don't like surprises.

And yes, we have so appreciated the positive feedback and the flexibility you all showed for last Sunday's online service, but truth be told, I hesitated to move the service online. In all honesty, my kids and I spent last Friday morning scraping ice off the church steps trying to make this building accessible for Sunday worship - I had to give the kids something to do, after all.

It was our property council that was finally the voice of reason. I kept getting these texts:

- "It sure doesn't look safe in that parking lot."
- "Would be a shame if someone fell in that parking lot."
- "Richard, I think everyone would be fine if you canceled Sunday worship."

Finally, I got the hint - I sent it over to session for them to weigh in. Within an hour, we had a unanimous vote to move Sunday worship online. Disaster averted.

In retrospect, it was obvious we needed to move online. But I don't like to change plans, foot of snow or no foot of snow. We had a baptism on the schedule, the bulletins already printed, the sermon half completed. How on earth we were going to pull all this off online?

It came together. Staff and liturgists filmed their parts, many of them in the snow. The Spirit showed up. A handful of family and friends with four-wheel drive vehicles showed up on a Saturday afternoon for the Baptism. It was beautiful. There were empty pews, but we could feel the love of Westminster Presbyterian

Church in this room, as we Baptized and blessed Jackson and his family on a snowy day. Hardly anyone got stuck in the snow on the way out.

I don't like surprises, but they are a part of this work we call the church; this life lived as community. Much to my chagrin, the Spirit does abide by the calendar or a spreadsheet.

For example, the Gospel of Mark uses the motif of surprise or wonder 34 times in its brief 16 chapters. It bookends our passage today:

Starting in Vs. 21: “[Jesus] entered the synagogue and taught. They were astounded at his teaching.”

Ending in v. 27: “They were amazed, and they kept on asking one another, ‘What is this? A new teaching – with authority.’”

It's interesting, by the way, that the passage mentions astonishment at Jesus's teaching twice, because, if you look closely, you notice, he doesn't actually teach anything. He casts out a demon.

In fact, of all the Gospels, Mark spends the least amount of space on Jesus's teaching.

- There's no Sermon on the Mount - that's in Matthew.
- There's no multi-chapter final discourse before the passion, that's in John.
- If you turn to the same place in Luke, right after Jesus's temptation in the wilderness, Jesus comes to a synagogue in his home town, and begins his work by teaching out of Isaiah: *The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor.*

Mark leaves all that out. Jesus's first public acts are calling the disciples and then this exorcism. He acts more than he teaches, or rather, his teaching is his action – living out that maxim, attributed centuries later to St. Francis, “Preach the Gospel at all times, and when necessary, use words.”

If the Gospel is about showing us something, rather than telling us something, I have to say, though, it leaves me with some questions – like, what do you do with the unclean spirit in the middle of the story?

In seminary and even graduate school, they didn't say much about the demons in the Gospels.

But in Mark, they are everywhere:

Ch. 3, vs. 11: *Whenever the unclean spirits saw him, they fell down before him and shouted "You are the Son of God!"*

Somewhat at a loss this week, I consulted three Bible dictionaries and one introduction to the New Testament in the church library. None of them gave any space or explanation to the unclean spirits in Scripture.

What do you do with the demon? In the past, I would have dismissed it: Well, Scripture was written before our modern understandings of psychology and medicine, after all. But in all honesty, that explanation felt unsatisfying this week. The Gospel itself makes no attempt to explain the appearance of this demon.

Who are we then, to explain them away?

And anyway, of all the characters of the story, it is only the demon who tries to explain for the reader what is going on.

"I know who you are," he says to Jesus, *"the Holy One of God."*

'I know what you are all about.' He seems to say. 'You're not going to surprise me.'

Contrast that, again, with the astonishment of everyone else in the synagogue:

v. 22 They were astounded at his teaching.

v. 27 They were amazed, and they kept on asking one another, "What is this – a new teaching?"

It's almost like what distinguishes the demon from everyone else in the story, is the fact that he couldn't be surprised; he couldn't be astonished. He had lost his ability to be in awe over the healing presence of God in our midst.

Do we leave ourselves open to astonishment?

Or like the demon, do we think we have it all figured out?

When was the last time you were in awe, over the presence of Christ among us?

On Thursday, I came across a post on one of the PC(USA) message boards by a presbyterian pastor who was lamenting the onslaught of church closures.

The pastor on the message board cited a quote, that “Up to 100,000 Christian church properties will be sold or repurposed in the next decade.” A quarter of all churches in this country.

Below his post, on the message board, some pastors lamented the closures:

“It’s a hard time to be a pastor,” one wrote.

Others lashed out in anger. Another post read, “And for 50 years, the PCUSA has closed their eyes, put their fingers in their ears and shouted so they couldn't hear or see this coming.”

I am certainly no stranger to that type of anger or sadness. I feel it and complain, sometimes all the time, about the state of the church and our world today.

But that day, I decided first to track down where that pastor, of that original post, found the quote about the 100,000 church properties being sold.

I found it in a *New York Times* article posted last week, entitled, "Amid a Housing Crunch, Religious Groups Unlock Land to Build Homes."¹

The story is about how churches are finding themselves cash strapped but rich in land, and how they are putting that land to good use by developing it into units to solve the affordable housing crisis in this country.

The article opens with a story about a 26-year-old autistic woman named Emma Budway, who is mostly nonverbal. Ms Budway had been living with her parents most of her life in Arlington, VA. But then, First Presbyterian of Arlington developed the empty lot where their original church building once stood into units for affordable housing.

¹ Stacey Freed, “Amid a Housing Crunch, Religious Groups Unlock Land to Build Homes.” *New York Times*. January 24, 2024. <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/01/24/business/religious-groups-churches-affordable-housing.html>

Finding a place to live on what was once church ground, Ms. Budway, is quoted in the article, saying “My world has gotten so much larger.”

Sometimes we think we know, all there is to the story:
Churches are closing. America is becoming more and more secular. 100,000 church closures in the next decade. God has left the building. What is there left to be astonished about?

But then, a church takes what on paper can only be construed as a failure: an empty lot, an abandoned sanctuary, and it turns that failure into a home, for someone who never had a home of their own. And God shows up, right at moment when we thought God had left us.

Do you have still room left for amazement?
Can you imagine a point, in your life, with the other onlookers in the synagogue, you would say, “Look! Will you look at that. I didn’t think it possible, but there it is - look right there! A new teaching”

You and I, we may go to church, sometimes, more out of custom, or obligation. You certainly don’t expect to be awed. Sometimes we go, just because we go.

Or you go to school because you have to;
it’s what is expected of you.

And you go to work;
you go to work;
you go to work.

And you think, ‘I know what this is. I know what I can expect. And what I shouldn’t expect. There’s no surprises for me here anymore. I’ve lost the ability to be surprised, to be awed.’

Because you’ve seen church doors close.

Or you’ve seen jobs that care more about the bottom line than the people they serve.

You’ve been in systems more enamored with their own survival than the flourishing of the people caught in their grasp.

Church leaders burn out.

Teachers burn out.

Nurses, technicians, doctors, custodians, civil servants, people...

– people are burning out.

God did not cause this wave of burnout.

- That was the pandemic.
- That was greed.
- That was fear.
- And it was bigotry, and it was marginalization.

But, it doesn't mean God has left the building, either.

Because the Spirit is alive, and people still care.

People still find love, and redemption, and second chances.

And God shows up, in the most unexpected of places.

In fact, God is at work in you, through you.

The only way to miss it is if we think we know, all there is to know. If we think that the story has already been written. And we've lost our ability for awe, for wonder – at the presence of God in our midst.

I'll be honest, I don't like surprises.

But God keeps showing up:

In you,

in people like you,

in the people who are around you.

And, sometimes, I just have to say, "Well, would you look at that. A new teaching. A new teaching."

Thanks be to God.

