

“I Know Who You are—The Holy One of God”

The Fifth in a Series on the Gospel of Mark

Texts: Mark 1:21-28; 1 Samuel 16:14-23

Jesus of Nazareth came preaching the good news about God. Because Jesus has come, God’s appointed hour has come and the kingdom of God draws near. Whenever the kingdom of God draws near, spiritual conflict is inevitable. And so as Mark recounts the opening phase of the public ministry of Jesus near the Sea of Galilee, we already know from the prologue of Mark’s Gospel that Jesus went out into the wilderness to be baptized by John and was then tempted by the devil. Although Mark doesn’t tell us this in so many words, it immediately becomes apparent that Jesus has triumphed over Satan. We know this to be the case once Jesus returned from the wilderness, he immediately began preaching about the kingdom of God and calling disciples to follow him. This is the sure sign that Jesus remained obedient to the will of the Father despite Satan’s efforts to tempt him. But there is yet another sure sign of Christ’s victory over Satan. When Jesus entered the village of Capernaum and began to teach with authority in the synagogue, he is immediately recognized by a demon as the Holy One of God, who has defeated Satan in the wilderness and who will bring about the dreaded day of judgment. And all those who witnessed this conflict were absolutely astonished. The news about Jesus will soon spread far and wide.

We are continuing our series on the Gospel of Mark, which is Mark’s proclamation of the good news about Jesus. As we saw last time, Jesus began his public ministry in Galilee soon after John the Baptist had been arrested by Herod. Once John had been “delivered up,” Jesus came preaching the good news of God, proclaiming that the critical hour was at hand and that the kingdom of God had drawn near. While Jesus never defined what he meant by these terms, his meaning is crystal clear. Because Jesus has come preaching the good news, the great drama of redemptive history has come to its climax. The critical moment has finally arrived. Everything in the Old Testament pointed forward to the person of Jesus and to the message he is now preaching. Since God has come to earth in the person of Jesus of Nazareth to save us from our sins, everything people believed about God, sin and salvation was about to change. That’s what Jesus meant when he said “the time has come.” Nothing will ever be the same.

The good news which Jesus preached centered around the fact that the kingdom (or rule) of God was being extended through the very words he was preaching. Jesus is that one in whom the kingdom of God draws near. The kingdom is present because Jesus is present. And because the kingdom is present, all those who hear Jesus’ words are thereby summoned to repent of their sins and believe the good news. Those who hear Jesus preach are commanded to change their mind about their sinful conduct, to cease from it, and turn unto God. Those who hear Jesus preach are to trust that Jesus’ death and righteousness is sufficient to render them righteous before God, when they know that they are sinners and deserve God’s punishment, not his grace. Thus when the kingdom draws near, men and women must repent of their sins and believe Jesus’ words. This is a command to be obeyed, not an invitation to be considered.

Mark recounts that in the opening phase of Jesus’ public ministry, Jesus called four men to be his first disciples and they responded by dropping everything and leaving their families behind to follow Jesus. Simon (Peter), Andrew, James and John, were minding their own business and fishing along the shore of the Sea of Galilee when Jesus walked up to them and said, “*Come, follow me . . . and I will make you*

fishers of men.” The result of Jesus’ call is that “*at once they left their nets and followed him.*” As we saw last time, fishing is not so much an evangelistic motif as it is a dramatic picture of divine judgment. The fish which are caught in a net or by a hook are brought against their will into the control of the fisherman. They are not invited into the boat, they don’t come of their “free-will” and once pulled in they are subject to whatever fate is determined by the fisherman.

When Jesus summons people through his preaching, they too are like fish caught in a net. Since Jesus is the true fisher of men, those whom he claims for his own are subject to whatever it is that Jesus has for them—they are specifically commanded to repent and believe. That Simon, Andrew, James and John immediately drop everything to follow Jesus is the proof that Jesus’ call is effectual. Because Jesus will baptize them in the Holy Spirit, these fishers of fish will in turn become fishers of men just as Jesus is. Because their own preaching will be Spirit-empowered, it will be every bit as effective as that of their master. These men will be sent to preach the message that the kingdom draws near, and they too will summon men and women to repent and believe. They have been claimed by the master who calls them. And having called them, Jesus will equip them to do the same kind of fishing he will do.

That Jesus began preaching the good news, announcing that the kingdom of God had drawn near and calling disciples were sure signs of his victory over the devil in the wilderness. But there was another sure sign of that victory, for early in the ministry of Jesus, Mark describes yet another sign which reveals a great deal to us about the person of Jesus and the nature of his messianic ministry. Jesus will teach as someone with authority and will send demons fleeing with but a single word. And everyone who witnessed this was absolutely astonished.

As Mark recounts the events associated with the opening phase of Jesus’ mission in the opening chapter of his gospel, we learn in verses 21-22 that Jesus and his disciples went “*to Capernaum, and when the Sabbath came, Jesus went into the synagogue and began to teach. The people were amazed at his teaching, because he taught them as one who had authority, not as the teachers of the law.*” No doubt, this report is based upon based upon the testimony of Peter—with whom much of this material in the gospel originates and who lived in the area before Jesus summoned him to become a fisher of men. Capernaum was a small village located on the northwestern shore of the Sea of Galilee. Very likely, it was the hometown of all four of the fishermen who are now followers of Jesus. The city—which now lies in ruins—will figure prominently in the opening chapters of Mark’s gospel. Capernaum is certainly not the place we’d expect the Savior of the world to reveal himself and begin his public ministry, but this small fishing village is exactly that place where the kingdom of God will first draw near.

We learn that it was on the Sabbath day that Jesus went into the local synagogue and began to teach. Again, because Mark’s account is so brief and because the NIV tends to flatten-out the vivid terms Mark uses, it is easy to overlook the significance of what Mark is saying. That Jesus was even allowed to teach at all in this particular synagogue indicates that he was regarded in some sense as a Rabbi (“teacher”) even though he did not have conventional qualifications or official authority—in other words, he hadn’t gone to seminary and was not ordained.¹ We are not certain how it was that Jesus was allowed to teach. We do know that throughout Mark’s gospel, he reports that Jesus is addressed as “teacher,” even by those who do have the recognized credentials. Some have used this identification of Jesus as the “teacher” to argue that Jesus had some official training, or that he was connected with some sect, such as the Essenes, which may have had some connection to that particular synagogue in Capernaum. But all of that is only

¹ Cranfield, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 72.

so much fruitless speculation-typical of much of critical scholarship.

As Cranfield puts it, we do get the sense here that it was Jesus' "unquestionable competence" in his ability to handle the Scripture, that led to him being given the opportunity to speak.² Mark doesn't tell us what it was that Jesus was teaching, but we can assume from what he has just said in verses 14 and 15, that it was the good news about God—the message that the time is at hand and that the kingdom of God draws near in his own person. But whatever it was that Jesus was teaching, Mark does tell us that the people present were absolutely astonished by what they had just seen and heard. In fact, the term Mark uses here is a one which conveys something much stronger than amazement (as in NIV), and is a word which indicates genuine alarm, perhaps even fear.

That someone with whom they were not at all familiar had come into their synagogue and then declared that God's time was at hand was startling at the least. No doubt, the ministry of John the Baptist had already rattled the people a bit. The members of this synagogue had probably discussed among themselves their various opinions about John and his preaching. And it is reasonable to assume that like other Jews throughout Israel, the people of Capernaum believed that something remarkable had occurred out in the wilderness when John appeared. The people surely thought that if John was Elijah, then the Messiah himself was soon to appear. And now with the discussion fresh in their minds, Jesus suddenly appears in the synagogue, preaching in such a way as to astonish everyone.

This man did not "hem or haw" when he spoke and he commented upon the Torah with great conviction and authority. If Jesus preached the good news to those who had assembled on the Sabbath, then we can be sure that Jesus announced that God had claimed everyone who heard his message as his own because *he* had come.³ Jesus was completely unlike the legalistic scribes and self-righteous pharisees with whom they had become accustomed. If John reminded people of Elijah, then Jesus was someone even greater than John or Elijah—perhaps even the Messiah himself. After all, John's ministry had signaled those who listened to his preaching to look for someone coming after him. When Jesus appeared it must have been obvious to all that he did not need a commission or a Rabbinic ordination to teach. This man was much more like a prophet than some boring old scribe. This man was obviously commissioned by God himself. Thus Mark reports that the people who were present that Sabbath day were absolutely astonished by what they had just seen and heard. The people were even a bit frightened by Jesus' presence.

Who was this man who teaches with authority, who teaches as though the words he was preaching were about himself? His words were compelling and demanded a decision.⁴ No doubt, Jesus summoned the people to repent of their sin and to believe the gospel. Thus, when Jesus comes preaching that the kingdom of heaven had drawn near, he has cast his net and is fishing for men and women. And those who heard him were reacting like fish suddenly caught against their wills and being pulled into the boat. This is not the Jesus "meek and mild" of Christian legend. This is Jesus of history, Israel's Messiah, who has come to preach the good news that God was saving sinners and to summon such sinners into the kingdom of God. And people were frightened and astonished. No one had ever seen anything like it!

² Cranfield, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 72.

³ Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 72.

⁴ Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 72.

If those present were astonished at Jesus' teaching, there was another visitor present that Sabbath day who reacted with something other than astonishment and he will let everyone know who Jesus is—"the Holy One, sent from God."

Mark has made the point that the kingdom of God had drawn near because Jesus had come. This was the primary sign that Jesus had defeated Satan out in the wilderness during the forty days of testing. Thus we should not be surprised at what happened in the synagogue on the Sabbath—in fact, it was inevitable. While the people were not quite sure what to make of Jesus, someone in the congregation sure knew who Jesus was. As Mark recounts these events in verses 23-24, we learn that "*Just then a man in their synagogue who was possessed by an evil spirit cried out, 'What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are—the Holy One of God!'*" Provoked by Jesus' announcement that the kingdom of God is at hand, a demon-possessed man was terrified (or at least the demon who possessed him was terrified) because the one who had authority to destroy Satan and all his works was now in their midst. The language Mark uses of the demon is that of defiance and resistance. But, as we will soon see, the demon cannot remain in the presence of Jesus of Nazareth.⁵ As John puts it in his first epistle, "*the reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil's work*" (1 John 3:8). In fact, Matthew records Jesus himself making a direct connection between his Spirit-empowered exorcisms, and the presence of the kingdom of God. Says Jesus "*but if I drive out demons by the Spirit of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you*" (Matthew 12:28). That is exactly what happened here.

Mark's account indicates that the demon so dominated this poor man's consciousness that when the man spoke, it was actually the demon speaking through him.⁶ Yet, from Mark's account it seems likely that the man present was known to everyone and was possibly even a regular in the synagogue. The demon's possession of the man was such that people did not know he was demon possessed, or else whatever symptoms were manifest appeared to be something much more innocuous. But the idea that the demon completely dominates its host, controlling the person's behavior is common to all the exorcism passages in Mark. In fact, the host is never mentioned in these encounters as Jesus and his disciples speak directly to the demon which has possessed the individual. It is also clear from the language used by Mark and the other gospel writers that they knew full-well the difference between demon possession and mental illness.⁷ Certain diseases could be caused by demons, such as the epileptic-like illness depicted in Mark 9, but the gospel writers also did not superstitiously or naively attribute all disease (including epilepsy) to the action of demons. They knew the difference between sickness and the work of Satan.

Demons are "evil spirits" and are rarely mentioned in the Old Testament. Jews who lived in the days of Jesus often believed that such evil spirits inhabited barren wilderness. One of the few places where such evil spirits are mentioned in the Old Testament is in 1 Samuel 16:14-23, our Old Testament Lesson this morning. Here we read that it is YHWH who sent this evil spirit which torments Saul. This spirit would also depart whenever David played his harp. Thus we read, "*now the Spirit of the LORD had departed from Saul, and an evil spirit from the LORD tormented him. Saul's attendants said to him, 'See, an evil spirit from God is tormenting you. Let our lord command his servants here to search for someone who can play the harp. He will play when the evil spirit from God comes upon you, and you will feel better.'*"

⁵ Lane, The Gospel According to Mark, 73.

⁶ Lane, The Gospel According to Mark, 73; cf. Cranfield, The Gospel According to Mark, 75-76.

⁷ France, The Gospel of Mark, 103.

So Saul said to his attendants, 'Find someone who plays well and bring him to me.' One of the servants answered, 'I have seen a son of Jesse of Bethlehem who knows how to play the harp. He is a brave man and a warrior. He speaks well and is a fine-looking man. And the LORD is with him.' Then Saul sent messengers to Jesse and said, 'Send me your son David, who is with the sheep.' So Jesse took a donkey loaded with bread, a skin of wine and a young goat and sent them with his son David to Saul. David came to Saul and entered his service. Saul liked him very much, and David became one of his armor-bearers. Then Saul sent word to Jesse, saying, 'Allow David to remain in my service, for I am pleased with him.' Whenever the spirit from God came upon Saul, David would take his harp and play. Then relief would come to Saul; he would feel better, and the evil spirit would leave him.'" The point is that even evil spirits are subject to God's command and decree and do not operate outside of God's providential control. As Luther so aptly put it, "the devil is God's devil." Demons remain under the authority of the sovereign God. That this is the case is about to be made plain in a synagogue in Capernaum.

When the demon recognizes who Jesus is, Mark says he cried out, which is again too mild a translation. Literally, the demon shrieked. When the demon cries out, *'What do you want with us?'* it uses language similar to that found throughout the Old Testament in the context of combat and/or judgment, such as in Judges 11:32, where we read, *"Then Jephthah sent messengers to the Ammonite king with the question: 'What do you have against us that you have attacked our country?'"* The whole scene in the synagogue is one of combat and conflict. The demon clearly sees the presence of Jesus as a threat and a sign that judgment is coming. This explains why the demon immediately shrieks out in response to Jesus' preaching, *"Have you come to destroy us?"*

While the people in the synagogue were astonished by Jesus' teaching and wondered who he might be, the demon knew more about our Lord's true identity than anyone else present. Since the advance of the kingdom means defeat for the dominion of Satan, it was only natural for the demon to connect the presence of the Lord and the nearness of the kingdom with the time of the end. "Jesus' presence entails the danger of judgment for all present." This was certainly true for the demon, who was subject to Jesus and who expressed fear the hour of judgment had come. But the threat of judgment was applicable to those listening to Jesus as well, who have been caught in Jesus' net and who will either die to self and live to God (repentance), or who will die under divine judgment.⁸ The presence of the judge means that judgment is coming, even if that particular Sabbath day in Capernaum was not the time of final judgment.

The demon not only identifies Jesus by name—"Jesus of Nazareth"—but also by his true identity—"I know who you are—the Holy One of God!" Jesus is not only empowered by the Holy Spirit—someone anathema to this unclean evil spirit, but the conflict between the two is inevitable, just as the sure and certain victory of kingdom is inevitable. This conflict can be seen throughout Mark's gospel when the sick and suffering identify Jesus using honorific titles showing Jesus great respect. They call Jesus "Lord" (7:8), "Teacher" (9:17), "Son of David" (10:47-48) or "Master" (10:51). But those who are demon-possessed identify Jesus using divine titles; "the most holy one of God" (1:24), "the Son of God" (3:11) or even as "the son of the Most High God" (5:7). Those who are suffering seek Jesus' help because he is a miracle-worker and perhaps the Messiah. But the demons clearly know who Jesus is and they identify him accordingly.⁹

⁸ Lane, The Gospel According to Mark, 73.

⁹ Lane, The Gospel According to Mark, 74.

That Jesus has absolute authority over this demon is seen in what follows in verses 25-26. “*‘Be quiet!’ said Jesus sternly. ‘Come out of him!’ The evil spirit shook the man violently and came out of him with a shriek.*” The Jews of Jesus’ day had certainly witnessed an exorcism or two. Exorcisms were not common, but were practiced by both Jews and pagans throughout the region. The members of this synagogue had very likely seen prayers and incantations and other futile efforts to cast out evil spirits. But they had never seen anything like this. At Jesus’ very command the demon is immediately silenced and forced to leave his host. The man convulsed as the demon left him, making some kind of audible noise indicating it had been put to flight. That the demon immediately and fully complied with Jesus’ command indicates that what the demon said of Jesus is absolutely correct. The Holy One of God has come. The kingdom of God draws near while the dominion of Satan is suddenly in full retreat.

The people in the synagogue that Sabbath Day had witnessed something truly amazing. They are completely alarmed, if not afraid. Not only did Jesus teach with authority and summon them to repent and to believe that in him God’s kingdom draws near, but at a single command the demon was silenced and fled in terror. No wonder that in verse 27, Mark tells us that “*the people were all so amazed that they asked each other, ‘What is this? A new teaching—and with authority! He even gives orders to evil spirits and they obey him.’*” Jesus did not cast a spell or utter some kind of incantation as they may have witnessed. No, he just spoke with authority and the demon submitted to him as though Jesus did indeed have authority to bring about the day of judgment.¹⁰ This explains why the people wondered whether or not this was some new teaching. They had no idea who Jesus was or what he had come to do. His words and actions were unlike anything they had ever seen. And their reaction—not surprisingly—is one of fear and alarm. Now that John the Baptist had been arrested and the time had come for his ministry to end, we read in verse 28, “*news about [Jesus] spread quickly over the whole region of Galilee.*”

Jesus’ public ministry has begun. The kingdom of God has invaded Capernaum. Men and women are summoned to repent from their sins and believe the good news which Jesus has been preaching. The people in the synagogue are like fish caught in a net. They cannot escape. Those men whom Jesus called to become his disciples immediately drop everything. They leave their jobs and family behind to follow him. Jesus speaks with absolute authority. He commands demons to be silent and they are silent. He commands demons to flee and they do. Who is this man? How dare he speak like this and do the things he did? The people were astonished and afraid.

But the demon knows who this is and is terrified. Jesus of Nazareth is the Holy One of God. He has come to destroy the works of the devil—the demon knew that this is the case. But Jesus has also come to call his people to repent and believe the good news. And when Jesus calls, we must follow. When Jesus commands us to repent and turn away from our sins, we must do so. When Jesus commands us to renounce our own righteousness and trust in him, we must.

The summons Jesus issues to us this morning is exactly the same as the summons he issued in Capernaum some two thousand years ago. Repent and believe, because Jesus is the Holy One of God and in him, the kingdom of God draws near to us this morning. This is God’s appointed time.

¹⁰ Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 76.