



WHO IS IN CHARGE HERE?

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Mark 1:21-28

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When I was growing up there was a show on the radio called “Desert Island Discs.” The idea was people were to imagine themselves deserted on an island somewhere and they could only have five record albums with them. Yes, the big round black things before CDs, which were before MP3s. They never explained how one was to play a record on a deserted island but nonetheless I had a list. My list back then was Bob Dylan’s “Blood on the Tracks,” the Rolling Stones’ “Exile on Main Street,” an album by Yo Yo Ma, and the soundtracks to “Jesus Christ Superstar” and “The Rocky Horror Picture Show.”

If I had to choose just one gospel to have with me on that deserted island, I would take Mark. Now there are lots of reasons to choose the gospel of Mark. It is believed to be the first of the gospels to be written. It is the shortest; you have to respect brevity. It has a wonderful sense of irony, which I always appreciate. And it crackles with a dramatic energy. But the most important reason to choose Mark can be found in our text this morning.

It is a text that starts with Jesus teaching in the synagogue but we are not told anything about what he taught. What we are told is that he teaches with authority. The Greek word translated as authority suggests freedom or power to act. And the people were astounded by what they heard. They could not make any sense of what or who was in their midst.

Then Jesus has an encounter with a man with an unclean spirit. The interaction occurs with immediate intensity. A voice cries out from the man but it is not he



who is doing the speaking. Whatever had power over him was speaking through him. “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.” The human onlookers may have no clue as to who Jesus is but there is no doubt from the unclean spirit as to whom Jesus is.

And just as clearly there is no doubt of Jesus’ power over that spirit. He rebukes the Spirit from the man, “Be silent, come out of him.” Just as he will rebuke the wind and the waves to save the disciples from the storm on the sea several chapters later.

The incomprehension of the people surrounding this dramatic showdown continues. “They were all amazed, and they kept asking one another, ‘What is this? A new teaching—with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him.’”

If you are running late for your brunch reservation, let me cut to the chase. We learn two fundamental truths in this text. The first is that we have no comprehensive understanding of what is going on with the divine in our midst. And second, God is clearly in charge.

On face value these may seem like rather run of the mill propositions. But in actuality they are foundational to the entire Gospel of Mark and have much to offer us as foundational truths for our own lives.

Back to our first proposition, we do not know what is going on. In all of the gospels, the disciples and everyone else have trouble comprehending who Jesus is, but in Mark they are clueless with a vengeance. And even when Peter does eventually stumble upon some vague sense of who Jesus may be, he does not understand what it means. I love this. And I love this for a variety of reasons. I am grateful for the explicit confusion of the disciples and of the crowd at the synagogue because I can relate to it so well. I am comforted to not be alone in all that I do not understand. But even more important than that is that it is a powerful



repudiation of the biggest risk facing the church, of all organized religion, and of anyone who dares to utter an opinion about God. We run the risk of falling into the trap that because some small reflected part of who God is has been revealed to us, that somehow we have a full comprehension of who God is and what God does. But as it says in that great line from Corinthians, “For now we see in a mirror dimly...”

Arrogant certainty in relation to our understanding of God is a crippling idolatry. For all of what those onlookers in the synagogue did not understand, they got something right. They asked questions. And they allowed themselves to be astounded and amazed by what they were experiencing. What they did not do is reject what they were experiencing because it did not fit the mold of their previous certainties. In the Jewish tradition the acknowledgement of the unknowability of God is made explicit. The part of God that is beyond our understanding has been given a name, Ein Sof, the endless one. Acknowledging we do not know it all allows for God to surprise us and speak to us in new and unexpected and deeper ways. Recognizing what we do not know is the first step to learning more about our God.

Now to the second proposition of this text: God is in charge. As we have heard, the authority of Jesus is presented to us in all bold capital letters. Twice the synagogue crowd comments on it and it is put in full display in the showdown with the man with the unclean spirit. In Mark, more than any other gospel, Jesus is portrayed as being locked in an apocalyptic battle with the forces of chaos that threaten to overwhelm us. In the worldview of ancient Palestine this battle is presented in rebuking unclean spirits, exorcising demons and stilling storms. Even at the very end, with his life on the line, being questioned by the chief priests about his identity as the Messiah, Jesus responds, “I am, and you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of the Power...” God, in Jesus Christ, was in charge, is in charge and will forevermore be in charge.

So why have I spent this morning raising up these two propositions from this text, our lack of understanding and God’s power? Maybe because it lets me vent about



a children's toy from over twenty years ago. It came out following the Cabbage Patch Kids craze. Some of you remember those cute and cuddly dolls that every child had to have one year. Trying to take advantage of this trend, somebody created something called the "Jesus Buddy Doll." Someone mailed it to a colleague of mine at the church I was serving. It was about eighteen inches tall with a cute chubby face, big brown eyes and lots of curly brown hair.

Now I get the idea, stuffed animals are one of life's great joys. For every person in this room, I am guessing there is a story of a beloved teddy bear, or dinosaur, or duckling. And we certainly want our children to know that God, in Jesus Christ, is a warm and loving comforter for us. It works on a number of levels. But here is the level on which it does not work. It is dangerous business to reduce God to eighteen inches and stuff the divine full of cotton.

There was a time when the church emphasized how imposing God was. We were told to fear God because God was all-powerful and we were ever at risk for being punished. God was sometimes envisioned as both distant and foreboding. Wisely, the church has sought a correction to this skewed view of the divine. We have rightly lifted up that God's relationship with us is based upon love. We have sought to emphasize that God is deeply present in the midst of our daily living. In Jesus Christ, we are reminded that there are no lengths God will not go in devotion to us. These are essential tenets of our understanding of God as Christians.

But we run the risk of over-correction. We want so much for people to know that God is both loving and accessible that we run the risk of limiting the divine, sometimes reducing God down to eighteen inches tall. Yes, God showers us with an extravagant amount of love. And, yes, God is intimately present with us. But that is not all that God is. Limiting God to solely what we think we understand about God tames and domesticates the divine. And a tamed and domesticated God is not God at all, it is the "Jesus Buddy Doll," something that can be neatly boxed up and placed on a shelf in the back of the closet.



Clearly, there is something comforting about reducing God to a loving and limited doll. But we need more than that, we really do. And thank goodness, we do indeed have a God that is so much more than that. I believe Mark was very intentional about refusing to give us a single word of what Jesus taught in this first story of him in the synagogue. As gifted a teacher as Jesus was, he was so much more than a teacher. He was the very Son of God in human form. And for every way that he exhibited his very real humanity, he cannot be reduced to merely that.

Can I tell you all the ways that God in Jesus Christ is more than that? Not a chance. And I am fine with that. What we know of God is a remarkable gift to us. But so is what we do not know. The mystery of all that is beyond our comprehension allows us the gift of wonder, the opportunity to be astounded and amazed, and the reminder that we are not God.

What I can tell you without question is that there is only one force in the entire universe who is in charge, and that is our God. Even in God's most vulnerable form, a human in ancient Palestine, it is God that possesses the power and authority. And this power and authority stands against all that threatens to overwhelm us. We may not receive any guarantee that we are immune to the dangers of the world. But we are promised that the one who is more powerful than anything else will guarantee our destination.

When we feel overwhelmed by this world and our very lives do not seem under our own control; when the storms of this life threaten to overturn all that we know; we need a God whose power is beyond our understanding. Dolls can be comforting. Teachers can shape us. But only God Almighty, beyond every boundary and every limit we can imagine, can save us.

Thanks be to God. Amen.