

# *SERMONS FROM ST. FRANCIS*

**Epiphany 4b**  
**January 29, 2006**  
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Texts: Mark 1:21-28

Mark had a story to tell; in fact he had a number of stories to tell. He had an urgent message to get out, to tell to folks who were beginning to think they were living in the last times. He was writing explicitly for a community of Christians experiencing increasing persecution and suffering. Instead of a powerful warrior-Messiah expected by so many, a man who would provide leadership for the overthrow of the Roman Empire, Mark as the first biographer of Jesus was telling about a man who necessarily endured suffering just as many of them would. Mark through his writing was serving as an interpreter of what up to then had only been the oral history of Jesus and his work during his brief time on earth about forty years earlier.

Mark's writing is graphic with an action focus. Some have called it the "see Jesus run" gospel: immediacy dominates in this fact-filled, fast-paced, exclamatory short narrative, highlighted with visual details. Yes, quite short and sometimes seemingly disconnected. We, the readers/listeners will have to use our imagination to put together all of the pieces of the story that Mark is telling. And these pieces won't tell us anything at all about the first thirty years of Jesus' life. Mark's message is the message of ministry and the cost of such faithfulness.

Mark starts his story, the story he himself most likely heard only in bits and pieces, with the beginning of Jesus' ministry when Jesus was about thirty years old. In less than what we call the first chapter of this book we quickly learn of Jesus' baptism by John and then are told that Jesus immediately was driven by the Spirit into the wilderness for forty days, a time, which included being tempted by Satan. And then, after John was arrested, Jesus returns to Galilee proclaiming: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news." "The good news" – there's lots of it for us to learn about.

We meet Jesus in today's gospel lesson shortly thereafter, following the rather quick recruiting of four of Jesus' first followers: Simon, his brother Andrew and then James and his brother John. Jesus saw these men at work while he was walking along the Sea of Galilee, on his way to Capernaum, the site of the happenings reported in today's reading. It is interesting to note that Mark reported that these men followed Jesus immediately after he called to them while they were working as fishermen. James and John even left their father in the boat! There was no "I'll go home and talk this over with my family," just an immediate dropping of what they were doing to follow a man they knew little if anything about. What kind of men would do such a thing? And what kind of a man would choose

with such little knowledge of them, the people who would become his intimate friends and those who would carry on the antiestablishment work that resulted in his violent and disgraceful death? Unanswered questions for us to ponder.

But let's go on. Now we meet Jesus in our lesson for today. We have absolutely no idea what Jesus and his new recruits talked about as they walked to Capernaum. We might be curious; surely, this extended walk must have resulted in conversation worth knowing about. But to Mark these were not the important details to share in his story-telling. Mark instead tells us with great energy what happened soon thereafter when Jesus arrived in Capernaum and began to teach at the synagogue on the first Sabbath he was in town.

Mark's narrative is vivid. Those who heard Jesus were not just surprised, they were astonished! Why? Because of what Jesus had said? We have no idea of what Jesus taught that day; Mark's attention is not on the content of Jesus' teaching but on the response of those who heard him. "He taught them as one having authority." It is the authority of Jesus that commands the attention, notably different from the authority of the usual religious leadership.

Visualize this in your mind's eye: Jesus teaching, his listeners exclaiming with astonishment, excitedly asking each other questions revealing their puzzlement at the presentation of this man who had just walked into their midst and immediately commanded their attention. For while Jesus was teaching, a man who had been in the synagogue with the others 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."

And then Jesus responds to him, but the "him" to whom he responds is not the man but rather the Unclean Spirit that has taken over this man. Jesus speaks directly and forcefully: "Come out of him!" And the Unclean Spirit does just that, not quietly but screaming and causing the man to have convulsions. Yet the Unclean Spirit, the only one there who recognized Jesus as the Holy One, responded immediately to that voice of authority and left the man.

Now imagine that you were in that synagogue. What a story to tell the folks when you got home that night. Imagine how quickly the word went out about this amazing man who spoke with such authority that even Unclean Spirits obeyed him. And Mark assures us: yes, Jesus' fame began to spread immediately throughout all of Galilee.

Now it's not part of today's lesson but Jesus' work for the day was not yet done. As soon as they left the synagogue and reached Simon Peter's home, Jesus reached out physically to Simon Peter's mother, lifted her from her bed, and healed her of a high fever. You might

call this a long day's work but only the first of the many that would follow as Jesus continued throughout the region, day after day: teaching, casting out demons, and healing.

What is it about this "day in the life of Jesus" that might have something to say to us, two millennia later? For me, it stands out so vividly that Jesus' authority was unmistakably clear and powerful. He sees four men working, interrupts their work and calls the men to follow him. They do so, immediately. He enters the synagogue and immediately begins to teach. His authority in teaching commands the attention of those who are in his presence. He deals forcefully with the "unclean spirit" who recognized Jesus for who he was when all others there, including Jesus' new followers, were mystified about this man with authority.

Throughout his ministry, Jesus was about healing, about making people whole. Most of the stories of Jesus' healing provide examples of the power of faith, but the casting out of demons, of unclean spirits, was different. The persons with the unclean spirits were not in control of themselves; the unclean spirits had the control, holding the person in whom they lived captive unless Jesus released them from their anguish. Freedom from demons is the necessary first prerequisite to all that follows in the transformation of lives.

We in our time and culture don't know much conclusively about "unclean spirits." Do "demons" and "unclean spirits" represent the cultural counterpart of what we in our time call psychosis? Do we see people in our own neighborhood captivated by such spirits. Perhaps. What we do know is that when a person is under the control of such forces, he or she is not what God has intended for that person to be.

What do those of us here today know about demons and unclean spirits? Some of us know a great deal. We have lived lives over which we have not had control. We may have experienced the power of alcohol, drugs, depression, to name but a few of the contemporary demons that have the power to enslave us. Some times our demons cry out, sometimes we have found ourselves in the presence of the One who was able to release us from our captivity. Would the man in Mark's story for today have encountered Jesus if the man had not come into the synagogue? It would seem not. The man so much in the control of the Unclean Spirit had nonetheless found his way into the synagogue where he appeared as one of the many there that night to listen to Jesus until the Unclean Spirit recognized that it was threatened by the very presence and the authority of Jesus.

And what do those of us here know about the authority of Jesus in calling us to be his followers? Some of us know a great deal; some of us are just catching a glimpse of this new possibility for our lives. The authority of Jesus breaks into our lives in wildly unplanned moments. We find ourselves unexpectedly in places where we are able to feel, to experience, this authority of Jesus. We are able to hear him through the voices of others

assuring us that our lives can be turned around. We find ourselves excitedly exploring a new reality.

For those of us who choose to follow Jesus, what does this choice mean for our lives? Frankly, we don't know as much about that as we would like. We tend to be impatient, to want to know now what has not yet been revealed. We have heard the call, we have recognized the power of the authority of the one who calls us, we find ourselves walking a new path, but we don't really know where we are going. We just know that we have bet our lives on the one who leads us.

The immediacy and vitality of Mark's story can be ours, if it is not already. We can know with assurance that we will not be led where we cannot follow. We can experience the healing power. We can know that we will learn from the Healing One how to become a part of the healing force in the lives of those whom we meet. We who have had the demons in our lives cast out and those of us who have experienced the life-healing powers of Jesus are now called to be healers in the every-day world in which we live and work each day. We are called to be doers. We are called to express our God-redeemed lives with vigor, to reach out and do what we don't know we can do. We are called to community where we can support each other and learn from each other as we seek out those for whom we will be a healing touch of our loving God who wants wholeness for all. We can be assured that there is much ahead for us in the St. Francis community as we seek to expand our mission in telling the good news.

Luther said it rather well: "This life ... is not righteousness, but growth in righteousness, not health but healing, not being but becoming, not rest but exercise. We are not yet what we shall be but we are growing toward it. The process is not yet finished but it is going on. This is not the end but it is the road. All does not yet gleam in glory but all is being purified."

Thanks be to God!

*Amen*