



September 10, 2006
Fully Alive in Christ

Mark 1:21-28
Jesus the Rabbi
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Mark's Gospel moves at breakneck speed. Matthew and Luke take time to introduce us to Jesus by describing his unique birth, and John's Gospel starts by going all the way back to creation. But Mark just dives into Jesus' ministry. He spends eight verses on John the Baptist, three on the baptism of Jesus, two on his temptation, and then he's underway with Jesus' work in Galilee. It appears that Mark wants his readers to encounter Jesus the same way the people of Galilee did—without the benefit of knowing about his miraculous birth or status as the Word of God that had become flesh. In other words, he wants us to discover who Jesus is just by watching his life and work.

The first glimpse Mark gives us of Jesus is as a rabbi. In verses sixteen to twenty of chapter one, this rabbi gathers his students who immediately drop their fishing nets and leave their boats to follow him. Then with these new disciples in tow, Rabbi Jesus heads to a synagogue in Capernaum to do what rabbis do—namely teach. Rabbis at this time were not thought of as clergy, but simply as teachers with students. So when the people of Galilee referred to Jesus as a rabbi, they were not thinking of him as the Reverend Jesus, son of Joseph. Initially, he was just thought of as a teacher of the Torah and the Prophets.

Anyone could be asked to stand up and teach the scriptures in the synagogues, and certainly, if a visiting rabbi were there, he would be extended this honor. That is how the people of Capernaum encountered this new rabbi's teaching. But it immediately became apparent that this was no ordinary teacher. We are told that those who heard him "were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority and not as the scribes," which is an ironic statement since the scribes were professional teachers of the law who were supposed to be in authority. But their words had become predictable, soulless, and thus lacking in power.

The practice of the scribes was to teach not only from the Torah but also from a vast oral tradition of teachings about the Torah, called the Mishnah. Most of the Mishnah was filled with detailed instructions of do's and don'ts that succumbed to a level of tedium the Presbyterian *Book of Order* could only dream of achieving. When a scribe would teach in the synagogues, he would stand up and claim the authority of an older long dead rabbi saying something like the following: "Rabbi Meir claims that in order to be clean you have to use at least a half cup of water when washing your hands." Can you imagine getting that every Sunday when you came to church? By contrast, Jesus would simply restate the words of Moses and the prophets and then describe what was at the heart of the scriptures: "What all the law and prophets teach is that you must love God

and your neighbor as yourself.” (Matt 12:37-40) It is no wonder people were astounded by the teaching of this new rabbi. But if that were all Jesus had done, if he had only spoken in profound ways about the heart of the law, he never would have gotten into so much trouble.

While he continued teaching in the Capernaum synagogue, on that first day of his ministry, a man with an unclean spirit cried out, “I know who you are, the Holy One of God.” Some of the scholarly commentaries on Mark’s Gospel wonder how a man with an unclean spirit got into the synagogue. Clearly, those scholars don’t go to church. We all have something unclean in us: things we have done and left undone; people we have failed; opportunities and blessings squandered. We have not loved God or our neighbor as ourselves, and no amount of water will wash the guilt away.

So it is not surprising that the man who was tormented by this unclean spirit was the first person in the room to identify Rabbi Jesus as the Holy One of God. He asked Jesus if he had come to destroy us. But rather than bringing judgment, Jesus told the demon to be silent and be gone. Is that not what we are all hoping to find—someone who can silence our demonic guilt and make it go away? When the people in the synagogue saw this man delivered, they were amazed and asked, “What is this? A new teaching—with authority!”

Well, the congregation almost had the right question. The real question is not “What is this?” but “Who is this?” Jesus is not a what, but a who. For centuries the people had been given volumes of religious “what” that told them what they had to do and what they had to stop doing. None of it could silence the guilt, self doubt, fear, or addictions that kept them from God. So God, the Holy One, came to them, and to us, to silence and expel whatever keeps us from him. And he came as an ordinary country rabbi named Jesus.

That’s very significant. According to Mark, the Gospel begins with an ordinary religious event. It was just another Sabbath in the synagogue where people were following the rituals they kept for centuries. But one day, they were astounded and amazed with holiness.

That is the function of our rituals of liturgy as well. How many times have you taken your place in one of these pews and stood for the hymns, the Gloria Patri, and the Creed, sat and listened to the scriptures read and preached, and bowed your head in prayer? These elements of worship serve as our familiar rabbis. But they don’t just present religion, which is a what. They seek to reveal Who is in our midst—the Holy One of God. If you have ears to hear, eyes to see, you would be astounded by worship.

A few weeks ago my wife Dawne and I had the opportunity to visit Edinburgh, which is pretty much Jerusalem for Presbyterians. While we were there, we went into St. Giles Cathedral where John Knox preached and led the Scottish Reformation. As soon as we entered the doors we heard the beautiful voices of a visiting choir that was providing a sacred concert. Quietly, we made our way to a pew. At first I sat there, just enjoying this fabulous concert. But after completing some of the great works of choral music, the choir concluded by singing *Amazing Grace*. Like you, I have heard and sung that song more times than I can count. It is not my favorite hymn, and

frankly I think it is a bit overdone. But for some reason this time, the tears welled up in my eyes as this familiar old hymn revealed the Who that makes grace amazing.

I cannot tell you why that happened. I wasn't feeling tortured by guilt, and I wasn't fatigued or exhausted. I was on vacation. But the Holy Spirit chose that moment to silence all other voices within me and to reveal the Holy One of God, Rabbi Jesus, who is the grace of God in our lives. "I once was lost but now am found, was blind but now I see." I didn't want the choir to ever stop.

The same ministry of the Holy Spirit happens all the time to me in our worship services. It can also occur in your life as our choir sings, in the other elements of the liturgy, or as you receive the sacrament. It can also happen in your home as you take time to follow the Daily Bible Readings and pray. The eyes of your heart can open, and now you see not a what, but a holy person. To be clear, I am not talking about being inspired or even moved. I'm describing the "Aha" moments, which are available to everyone, when you realize that it is all about the Holy One with us. That is what all the law and the prophets, the gospels and the epistles, are proclaiming.

Jesus the Rabbi is so much more than a teacher. He didn't just give us information about God; he gave us God. As the late historian of Christianity Jaroslav Pelikan has said, "There are no cathedrals built in honor of Socrates." And there is no hymn about the amazing grace of Cicero. They were just teachers. But to this One who has the authority to bring heaven and earth back together, who can expel the demons that tear our world apart, and who has created a future filled with hope, to this Holy One we have sung and worshiped for 2,000 years. And if you pay attention, you'll be astounded by the amazing grace.

Benediction: Jesus is not interested in telling you what to do. But he's dying to give you God. If you could see that, you would know what to do. Amen.