

ASTONISHED

MARK 1:21-28; FEBRUARY 1, 2009

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The Gospel of Mark is the original *Cliff Notes* of Jesus' life. First of the gospels and briefest, it has been called staccato, news-bullet style reporting; the essentials of the good news minus flourish or elaboration.

What Mark tells us today in a nutshell is this: Jesus teaches as one with authority (not like the religious leaders); and as if to demonstrate this authority he commands an evil spirit to come out of a man.

Everyone, says Mark, was astonished.

Today's account lacks any moral, ethical or doctrinal statements by Jesus. There is no mention of the content of his preaching, only this striking observation about the way in which he taught.

We are only twenty lines into Mark's Gospel and before anything else he wants us to know, it wasn't the words Jesus preached but Jesus who is powerful.

Nor does Mark say anything about the man with the unclean spirit before or after the miracle. Like a bare table with a vase of flowers at the center Mark clears away everything so that we can witness Jesus' encounter with the unclean spirit and the onlookers' amazement.

And here is a theme Mark loves to replay: unclean spirits and others outside organized religion recognize who Jesus is while those who might be expected to recognize him – scribes, Pharisees and the people of God – fail to realize who he is; as if to fulfill the John's haunting statement that "he came to his own people but they knew him not."

Whatever else he comes to say or do Jesus comes first to battle and defeat the unclean spirits, the forces of darkness and death and all in our world that would prevent you and me from knowing him and becoming whole and well.

To confine Jesus' ministry to red letter sentences or even to debate the historical accuracy of his words as interesting and important as such work is, is secondary. We fill libraries, schools and education programs discerning what is fact and what legend, while this brief Gettysburg Address-of-a-Gospel tells us simply why he came and why he matters.

He was as much of God as we will ever hope to see or know. The power that shaped the stars and guides the cosmos is at the very core of his life and our encounter with him.

John Wesley, founder of the Methodist Church went one evening to a meeting of fellow Anglicans, heard someone read Luther's lecture on Romans, and went home that night astonished, convinced that Jesus died for his sins.

Blaise Pascal, a French mathematician, tried to think his way toward God without success then spent his life trying to make sense out of the Bible. Finally, at 4am on November 23rd, 1654 he recorded on a piece of paper found in his jacket after his death,

“Fire. God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Certitude. Certitude. Joy. Peace. God of Jesus Christ.”ⁱ

A colleague tells the story of how depressed he was when he asked people what they heard in his sermons and they reported things that were tangential to or beside the point he was trying to make, even things he did not directly say in the sermon.

Sharing his discouragement with a wise member of the church she said to him whatever gave you the notion that sermons are about ideas. Everyone knows the purpose of a sermon is to meet Jesus and be amazed that he hasn't given up on us.

We long to have our religion, like the rest of our lives, nailed down. But something in us isn't satisfied by checking off a list of things we've sunk much of our lives into achieving. We also long, I believe, coming here week in week out, to encounter Jesus, to let go of our exhausting attempts to wring meaning out of life and let God remake us.

And whether that longing is close to or far away from the surface of your heart acknowledging and acting on that yearning is still the way to new life.

As the poet Rumi says this morning, learning knowledge or the practice of a craft is so much easier and more predictable by the beaten path that leads to it.

Yet, that special knowledge that is gained soul to soul “not from a manual or words but through secrets held in the seeker's heart” that is the knowledge that expands and remakes our lives. That is the knowledge that an encounter with Jesus conveys and the authority with which he teaches.

When that US Air flight got in trouble two weeks ago and only two and a half minutes after takeoff started preparing for a crash landing, a remarkable number of people on board began asking God to forgive them their sins.

It wasn't academic knowledge they wanted or an earthly authority they were praying to, but when the chips were down they were reaching out for and hoping something greater than any one of them was there and would listen. Even the hope that such a God might exist brought comfort in the terror of that flight gone bad.

When Jesus shows up the unclean powers start popping out from behind the disguises they've found in our lives and begin heading for the hills. The fear that paralyzes us and prevents us from expanding our souls and living into wholeness subsides.

Today's story begs the question, what authority do you and I recognize not just when our plane is taking a nosedive but when we find ourselves among the jobless or the diagnosis isn't good or we wake up one day and ask 'why am I here, what am I supposed to be doing.'

So come to the table. Encounter Jesus in the bread and wine. Let him expand your soul, astonish you and remake your life into something new. Amen.

ⁱ Will Willimon, *Pulpit Resource*, Vol 37, No. 1, Year B, January – March 2009, 23.