

## **A Prophet Like Moses**

Our first reading this morning, from the book of Deuteronomy, is a statement by God that He would send His people a prophet “like Moses,” who, since the Middle Ages, has been viewed as a possible author of the book. It’s no surprise to hear that Bible scholars don’t agree with who actually wrote it. Needless to say, as followers of Jesus, we hear statements scattered throughout the Old Testament like, “I will raise up for them a prophet... from among their fellow Israelites, and I will put My words in his mouth. He will tell them everything I command him,” (Deut. 18:18), and can’t help but think it’s talking about Jesus Christ. It’s designed to do that. The whole Bible – both the Old and the New Testaments – point us ever deeper into relationship with the Risen One, if we take the time to read it daily, and think about what it is that God is trying to tell us through it.

He is, after all, “the Word made flesh and dwelt among us. We have seen His glory, the glory of the One and only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth,” (John 1:14). Today we’re going to keep talking about how mysterious Jesus is, especially in the early days of His ministry. If you have your Bible or a Bible app handy, turn with me to Mark 1:21-28. **Read Mark 1:21-28.**

Just before our Gospel lesson this morning Mark records the call stories of the first disciples. We’ve talked about Simon, Andrew, James, John, Philip and Nathanael the last couple weeks. Those guys were really dialed in to following Jesus – and years later – almost all of those earliest disciples would pay for following Him with their lives. Earlier in the chapter, God has already let the secret out that Jesus is His own Son – but we get the sense that there’s a lot more to Jesus than meets the eye.

## **People Were Amazed**

Notice how the Gospel lesson opens. “They 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,” (Mark 1:21-22). Jesus and the earliest apostles were traveling around the area of Galilee, and He went into the synagogue and started teaching. We’d say preaching today. And the people were floored. The stuff Jesus was telling them was practical. It made sense. He knew what He was talking about, unlike the Pharisees and Sadducees.

Then some excitement happens. “Just then a man in their synagogue who was possessed by an impure 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!’” (verses 23-24). We don’t talk much about demons in the United Methodist Church.

Oftentimes, we kind of gloss over them, or people will dismiss these as some sort of mental illness. We may talk about them figuratively, like demons of drugs and alcohol.

There are wicked forces at work in the world today. There always has been, ever since pride crept into the heart of the serpent who led Adam and Eve to disobey God in the garden. Demons are real. As we read the Gospel accounts, we encounter them over and over. One thing I've noticed, is the unusual way in which they talk.

### **Trying to Ruin God's Image**

In this case, we're told the impure spirit – the demon – shows up in a synagogue. It's in a house of worship. Some of the devil's best works against God's image-bearers happen inside the walls of the Church. The guy with the demon is sitting through the worship service, listening to Jesus preach! Notice what he says – it's actually the demon doing the talking – "What do you want with *us*? Have You come to destroy *us*? I know who You are!" You hear the confusion there – the inner conflict. It seems like anytime Jesus encounters a demonic presence in the Gospels, there's always more than one lurking around.

I read this Scripture passage earlier in the week, and the other Gospel story that came immediately to mind is the one where the demon-possessed man is living in the graveyard. You remember that story. It comes a little later, in Mark 5. The guy runs up to Jesus and says, "What do You want with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? In God's name don't torture me!" (Mark 5:7), and then later, when Jesus asks his name, he responds, "My name is Legion, for we are many," (5:9).

In that story, the demons beg Jesus to send them into a herd of pigs. The demons mess the people up so much they lose sight of who – and even what – they are. Half the time they say "we," and "us," and in another breath, "I," "me." They're confused. There's a whole lot of confused people running around in our society today – and if you think demons aren't involved in that, I've got news for you.

Satan will stop at nothing to ruin God's image-bearers in any way he can, because he absolutely hates God and knows hurting what God loves is the only way he can hurt Him! Let's be clear here – every human being who has ever existed, or will ever exist, is an image-bearer of God. They may be flawed, they may be horrible reflections of His image – but He loves them enough to take the nails anyhow, and tasks us with getting the news out that Jesus loves them.

### **The Holy One of God**

In our lesson today, the demon-possessed man states, "I know who You are – the Holy One of God!" Can you imagine someone hollering that in a worship service? One would think that if Jesus wanted to keep His identity a secret, He would have performed this miracle quietly and privately. Notice how Jesus responds. "Be quiet!"

said Jesus sternly. “Come out of him!” (verse 25). Then Mark tells us the demon shook the man and came out with a shriek (verse 26, paraphrased).

Jesus performs this miracle, and the people are already amazed because He’s preached with authority, and now they’re really astonished. “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 impure spirits and they obey Him.’ News about Him spread quickly over the whole region of Galilee,” (verses 27-28), Mark records. Jesus’ teaching and healing both cause the people around Him to react in astonishment and respond with the same kind of urgency and authority to share the news of who Jesus is that the demon-possessed man proclaimed, “I know who You are – the Holy One of God!”

Jesus’ actions reveal a key element of His identity – He is the One with authority. Yet Jesus insists on keeping His identity secret. So why does Jesus insist on the secrecy of His identity but continue to act in a way that undermines keeping His secret? The more that Jesus teaches and performs miracles, the more people are amazed and drawn to Him. It’s almost like the mystery is part of Jesus’ message itself.

### **Extra! Extra! Read All About It!**

I liked super hero comic books and movies when I was growing up. Superman was one of my favorite characters. Lex Luthor was always trying to sabotage him with kryptonite. When you think about Superman, or Spiderman, the newspaper editor is always trying to find out the hero’s real identity. And it’s not to thank Clark Kent or Peter Parker, it’s so the paper can “spin” what’s happening. The editor wants to sensationalize what the hero does so they can sell more papers and plant wacky ideas in people’s heads about Superman or Spiderman somehow being in cahoots with the criminals they’ve stopped.

How many times have you stood in the check-out line at Kroger or Walmart, and read the covers of those magazine tabloids? If I’m not in a hurry, and going through a living person’s line where I’m not ringing myself out, I read them. They slap wild, unbelievable headlines on them to get us to by their magazine. One of my all-time favorites was on the cover of the Enquirer close to 30 years ago – “UFOs land in White House lawn!” You’d think by now they would have come out and flown away, and we would have seen them, right?

Back in the late 1990’s the Fox network put out a three season series called *Breaking the Magician’s Code*. The show explained the secrets of a lot of magic tricks. We talked a couple weeks ago about the disappearing quarter trick. When you’re mesmerized by how a Harry Houdini or David Copperfield pulls off their magic tricks, and then find out the reality of how they did what they did, it can leave you feeling a little disappointed. People generally like to have a little mystique or mystery in their lives – it keeps things interesting.

Being aware of the mystery – the unknown aspects of life – help create space in us to wonder at the possibilities, and opens us up to believe the impossible. Jesus spends a lot of His ministry teaching, healing, loving, and speaking truth into people in ways that creates space for them to wonder about alternative possibilities for their lives, rather than what's been dictated to them by the rules, laws, commandments, and nowadays, the cultural norms of society. While Jesus was doing His ministry, people were compelled to follow Him, to see if they could figure out for themselves who Jesus is.

The same is still true today. People all over the world are looking at the followers of Christ to see if the Jesus we say we're following causes us to be any different than the rest of the world, or if He's just another magician – a charlatan – trying to pull the wool over their eyes, and make all their quarters disappear into His pockets. When people who know us, who know who we used to be, in our lives before encountering Jesus, see us, do they see how He's changed us? People are open to believing the impossible when they see the impossible happen before their eyes. How do our actions reveal who Christ is to the world – not by shouting explanations of His identity – but instead by acting in such a way that creates space, and compels and opens others to believe the impossible?

**Prayer:** Holy and awesome God, Your Son's authority is found in integrity and living truth, not the assertion of power over others. Open our imaginations to new dimensions of Your love, and heal us of all that severs us from You and one another, that we may grow into the vision You unfold for us. Amen.