

Sensing Jesus' authority

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We preach these stories so often that sometimes it's the unexpected that keeps us going. It's especially apt when some new nuance blazes up into our awareness during the season of Epiphany.

I was delighted to find something I'd never noticed before in today's gospel. The synagogue goers in Capernaum express amazement after Jesus silences the unclean spirit: "What is this? A new teaching—with authority!" But these folks were already amazed before the miracle, because Jesus taught them in a way that demonstrated his authority. The exorcism *proves* his authority, proves that he is not like the scribes who teach through case law and precedent.

It's as if the people in the synagogue *sense* Jesus' authority before they *see* it—and this applies even to the demons, who acknowledge his power before they experience it. This is a theme throughout Mark: the world and everything in it is possessed of a kind of spiritual intuition related to Jesus and his ministry, one that leads to or proceeds from amazement.

Whether the demons or the people correctly construe Jesus' power or interpret his intent is another matter, a relevant one throughout Mark. Still, the readiness of some to hear and obey (to follow, to bring their loved ones to Jesus, to intercede for their suffering neighbors) and the resistance and retrenchment of others (demons, swineherds, religious leaders) indicate a sense of who Jesus is prior to actual experience. This intuition seems to shape the moment of encounter and its consequence.

The synagogue goers' familiar benediction is also striking because Jesus doesn't really offer any new teaching in this passage. We know from Luke 4—and from earlier in Mark—that Jesus is teaching and preaching the kingdom of God, and that his emphasis is different from John's: while the baptizer preaches repentance to prepare for the coming kingdom, Jesus preaches the kingdom come as the occasion

for and source of repentance. But the Old Testament writers also envisioned God's reign as a promised reality.

It is Jesus' authority that makes the teaching seem new. Authority is not the same thing as power. In the New Testament, power has an almost universally negative connotation, and it can be conferred, grasped or wielded because it remains external.

Authority, on the other hand, is internal—or, given that the Greek word for authority means "out of (one's) essence"—essential. Whatever Jesus does is a demonstration, not of external power, but of his inner life and essence. Then and now, many religious authorities trade mostly in the external power granted by position, and are eager to maintain that power. But Jesus trades in authority, which he is willing to relinquish for the sake of others.

Where did this guy with the unclean spirit come from, anyway? It amazes me that he was in the synagogue. Or maybe it doesn't—there are probably lots of synagogue goers and churchgoers possessed of unclean spirits. Most of these spirits are mostly benign and quiet until a spiritual authority comes. Then they are flushed, like a covey of quail.