

January 31, Epiphany 4B (Mark 1:21-28)

What does it mean to teach “with authority”?

by [Brian Maas](#) in the [January 13, 2021](#) issue

In last week’s text, Jesus made his initial impression by preaching. In this week’s, he drives that impression home by teaching. As preaching was Jesus’ first action on reaching Galilee, so teaching is his first action now that he’s arrived in Capernaum. Mark’s emphasis on Jesus’ teaching overwhelms even his emphasis on Jesus’ preaching. Mark mentions Jesus’ teaching, or records him being referred to as teacher, more than 30 times in his short Gospel.

Having preached his way into the call of his first disciples, Jesus now teaches his way into the impressions of the populace—and into reaction from the realm of unclean spirits. Jesus calls attention not only to the content of his teaching but to himself and his identity. The crowds recognize that he teaches with authority, an authority the unclean spirits recognize is of the very Holy One of God.

What’s so distinctive about Jesus’ teaching that not only humans but spirits respond with awe and amazement? What does it mean to teach “with authority”? And how do we, who live in a culture so suspicious of authority, teach in the way of Jesus?

Each time I hear this section of the Gospel, I envision a Jesus whose words carry the vitality and authenticity of direct connection to the source: one who doesn’t just dispense content but tells the story he’s lived, who speaks not of what he’s heard but of what he knows. By contrast, the scribes, for all their wisdom and learning, can only pass on what they’ve received, passed on from what others received, and so on.

I can relate. As a young adult who’d grown up in a small rural town (“hermetically sealed in a Mason jar,” my college roommate would say) and graduated in a high school class of 69 students, it was a stretch for me to attend a small private university in a college town of 175,000 people. That little campus was a whole new universe for me, the source of discovery after discovery, each of which expanded not only my worldview but my world. This was nowhere more true than in my studies

in the religion department.

Every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday afternoon of my freshman year was spent in the two-semester Introduction to the Bible course, taught by an adjunct professor, the rector of a small Episcopal parish who had a PhD and a passion for teaching. Three afternoons a week the tall, thin lecturer would hold forth, Ichabod Crane in tweed, referring us not to a textbook but to the Bible and to the ream or more of photocopied papers he'd distribute, copies of his own work and highlights of others'—fully attributed, of course.

Getting through all 66 books in 96 class sessions, less those dedicated to exams, was a feat. Yet I was rapt, less by that professor's manner and mode of teaching than by the people and stories he introduced me to. Growing up, I never missed Sunday school and worship was a constant and our bedtime stories were Bible stories, but though it was the same Bible he was introducing us to, these were not the same two-dimensional characters and stories I thought I'd mastered.

Through his course I encountered tales that had been overlooked by the lectionary and the Sunday school curriculum. I met a lot of characters I had not previously known. Most intriguingly, I was reintroduced to flesh-and-blood people, warts and all, who had previously been caricatures at best. This was a new teaching, and with authority! Not the authority of a PhD, but of one who truly knew the Bible as the living word of God, as my tradition presumed—wrongly—that I did. For the first time ever, scripture was indeed alive to me.

That professor was gone before my sophomore year ended, off to other opportunities, but by that time I was hooked. I spent most of the next decade in one class or another, delving ever deeper into scripture through college and graduate school alike. I was a disciple not of that professor but of the living story to which he introduced me. I believe I'm a disciple still.

Is that what happens at that synagogue in Capernaum? Are Jesus' words about God so active, so alive, so compelling that they capture the attention and the imagination of all who hear? Do they hear the same old thing in a new and vibrant voice? Do the law and the prophets seem real and alive as they never have before? Is there an element of the first person in Jesus' teaching that distinguishes it from the third person of the scribes? Is that what gets the attention of the unclean spirits?

That may be too many questions. But my experience of scripture is that it skews toward the lively when approached with curiosity and veers toward deadness when approached with certainty. Teaching is supposed to be one of the roles of my office as bishop. I confess—and sometimes complain—that I get to do far less of it than I imagined. Still, that may be a blessing. I fear my teaching may be more like the scribes' than like Jesus', and that won't do.

Yet in preaching, encountering people who've heard it all before, it's my hope that sharing a living word, engaging it (and them) with curiosity, may help people to experience the word's vitality themselves, to catch a bit of the spirit that would have them not marveling at the teaching but rather asking, with the good folks of Capernaum, "What is this?"—and having their questions carry them into the week that follows.