

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

All those years in scribe school count for nothing when one rustic with charisma comes along!

by [Benjamin J. Dueholm](#) in the [January 2024](#) issue

A billboard on my commute seeks to draw drivers to a big downtown church by promoting three apparently prominent biblical teaching authorities. I recognize only one of them, from his interventions in national politics, but the others look pretty similar: male, graying, in conservative suits. The names and faces are, I imagine, intended to inspire confidence in the seriousness and sobriety of the teaching available at this church. But I confess that when I drive by, my reaction is unfair and uncharitable. None of them, I think to myself, would recognize God if God bit him on the butt.

I have no grounds for this reaction, of course. The same could just as easily be said of me, though my confidence game gear looks different (sober chasubles over an alb that has usually been laundered in the last quarter). For all I know, it would be true. My job is different from theirs, but it's a job all the same, and it is subject to its own Spirit-stifling routinization.

This is why I have come to take a rather gentler view of the scribes than the gospel accounts give us. Try as I might, I can't imagine them as a nefarious, consciously self-seeking cohort of bad-faith actors. To the extent that they are analogous to lawyers or Christian clergy, I obviously can't deny the possibility of true venality—I live in Dallas, after all, America's longtime capital of religious hucksterism. But I always imagine someone diligently plugging away at a set of texts and duties that he (presumably they were all "he") had been handed and making the best of it.

So when the synagogue at Capernaum expresses astonishment that Jesus teaches with authority and "not as the scribes," I feel a certain secondhand humiliation. All those years in scribe school just count for nothing when one rustic with charisma

comes along! One need not stretch the text too far to imagine the reaction, just off the page, of those administrators and custodians of the people's legal and prophetic tradition who are just abandoned in an instant without a thought for credentials, preparation, or any of the normal markers of "one having authority." From their point of view, this event might have been evidence of the fickleness of the crowd and their desire to be told things that exceed the bounds of the text and tradition. How many diligent, faithful, gray-faced clergy through the ages must have felt that way when a flashy, mysterious newcomer stole their thunder?

If the story ended at verse 22, we would have an interesting question about authority on our hands, one with by no means welcome implications for churches today. In what does the perceived authority of Jesus inhere? He doesn't come with a diploma or the commendation of a teacher. It's hard to imagine him in vestments or professional garb, with a learned and competent but aesthetically restrained deck of slides to aid the listener. No billboards or websites trumpet the appearance of this sought-after guest speaker.

Is there something in his delivery? The message itself? I say, and believe, that Jesus appears to us just as we need him to. But to his contemporaries and fellow countrymen, he must have appeared in a very specific guise, some scuffed texture to which the glue of the Spirit could have adhered.

But that's not where the story ends. The authoritative teaching of Jesus, baffling as it must have been to the scribes, provokes a demon in the crowd. "I know who you are, the Holy One of God," it says, before Jesus casts it out. Mark's Gospel famously foregrounds the confessions of the demons; in a way, they speak more truly of Jesus than either his followers or adversaries.

That, however, is an insight for the reader or hearer secondhand. Inside the story, this is not a rhetorical choice but a fascinating demonstration. It is one thing to believe the testimony of the trappings, the demeanor, or the charisma of the teacher. It's no great shock, after all, when someone willing to be persuaded is, in fact, persuaded. But the testimony of a foe is different.

The assent of demons is too high a bar for most of us to clear in our scribal ministry. But I do wonder how often we encounter the authority of the unlikely confession. Churches today can seem to be more intent on scrambling for the persuadable worshiper, perhaps disengaged or disenchanted with their last church but curious enough to be won over by a new one, than reaching the truly non-believing. That's

what those billboard faces are doing, and that's what I'm doing, too: being the most plausible scribes we can be. But the most dramatic and authoritative responses are exactly the ones we aren't looking for. For those, the most well-trained and sensitive scribe can be no more than a medium or bystander for words and power that come from somewhere else entirely.