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Epiphany 4 – Mark 1:21-28 – Truth Doesn't Back Down
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If someone asks you, “What makes your Bible any different or any better than any other holy book or inspirational writing in the world?” do you have an answer? I'm hoping your answer won't be “Nothing,” but that's almost the answer that we Christians are expected to give nowadays, aren't we? We're almost expected to be apologetic about what we believe; almost expected to be quick to say, “But I'm not an expert, so take it or leave it as you wish;” almost expected to make room at the table for every other religion and philosophy and way of life out there, as if they're all equally good.

But I can't imagine Jesus saying things like that, because he knew better. God's Word compares to anything that would rival it like the truth compares to a lie. One always in time proves itself right, and the other always ends up proven wrong. Yes, the Bible has a uniqueness in its message and historical accuracy that are unparalleled; but even more importantly, the Bible has a power that changes lives and eternities. That power – that divine authority that comes with God's Word – is what Jesus shows in our Gospel reading for today, and his lesson is the same for us as it was for those people gathered there in that synagogue at Capernaum: Truth doesn't back down. Not from society around you, and not even from Satan himself.

So let's set the scene. It was the Sabbath Day, the day that faithful Jews set aside to gather to worship their God, so Jesus and his disciples went together to the *synagogue* – you can think about it like their local church. But synagogues didn't have resident preachers like our churches do nowadays. Every Saturday, either the elders of the synagogue or a guest speaker would do the preaching and teaching. Well, Jesus was beginning to make a name for himself already this early on in his ministry, so on this day he was invited to stand up and lead the service.

But when he did, the people who were gathered there heard something very different than what they were used to. “*The people were amazed at his teaching, because he taught them as one who had authority, not as the teachers of the law.*” See, it wasn't that the teachers of the Law didn't know what they were saying or doing. They were very well educated; they were the religious experts who were renowned in Jewish society. It's just that none of their education or expertise did the people any lasting good, because they never talked about the things that truly matter in life. They were so much more concerned about upholding the traditions of their forefathers based on what this rabbi said or what that rabbi heard and so on, than they were about

upholding the commands of God. They were so much more concerned about loving their trivial rules about their robes and beards and holy days, than they were about loving their neighbors. They were so much more concerned about imposing regulations than they were about lifting burdens.

But that's not how it was when Jesus got up to teach. Even though Jesus was a carpenter with no formal spiritual training – or so they thought – his preaching and teaching were totally different. He didn't need to quote the rabbis. He didn't need to reference the forefathers or their traditions. In many cases he didn't even say like the Old Testament prophets did, “Thus says the LORD.” No, when Jesus spoke, he spoke on his own authority and no one else's, and he said, “This is the way it really is.” He didn't share man-made rules, he shared God's truth. And in a society and religious climate that was fiercely Law-oriented – all about what *you must do!* – he preached a Gospel of forgiveness and freedom. He spoke with Divine authority because he *was* divine – that's who he is, God in the flesh! And even when the Jewish religious leaders challenged him and attacked him for that, Jesus didn't blink, because Truth doesn't back down. He was the fulfillment of all the promises of the Old Testament and all the hopes of his people since the beginning of time, and the reason he came was to share that truth with us for today and for eternity, no matter what.

So what does that truth mean for us right now? It means we can have the same confidence when we read and share God's Word that it still carries that same divine authority. We live in a world and especially in a society that has traded Truth for COEXIST bumper stickers, debates over gender identity and personal choice, and endless bickering over what may or may not be fake news, but that doesn't change the fact that there *is* a place to find truth in this world. It's in the Holy Bible, God's timeless Will for all times and places, his unchanging Word for an ever-changing world. And even when society around you belittles the Bible as out-of-touch and irrelevant to modern science and morality, even when we have to have those hard conversations about sin and repentance, even when every other religion in the world makes it all about you and your works, stand strong, friends, because Truth doesn't back down. Yes, Jesus *is* the Son of God. He *is* the only way to salvation. He *has* empowered us for new life in this world, and he *will* surely call us one day to eternal life in heaven. So when we read God's Word and share God's Word, let's do it boldly just like Jesus, because his Word has a powerful truth and divine authority that still changes hearts and lives and eternities, and that never fails and never proves false.

But it's one thing to have authority over men. It's another thing entirely to have authority over the supernatural. Yet that's exactly what Jesus showed

when a demon-possessed man came in that day looking to pick a fight. “*Just then a man in their synagogue who was possessed by an evil 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!’*”

For a moment, that almost seems kind of respectful toward Jesus, doesn’t it? But make no mistake, this was a sly trick meant to undercut Jesus and undermine his plans. Yes, everything this demon said here was true. He knew exactly who Jesus was and why he had come – he was “*the Holy One of God,*” the perfect, sinless Son of God who was specially promised, sent, and set apart for God’s purposes of redeeming sinners and bringing salvation to this world. And yes, that means he *had* come to destroy the devil and his demons and all their evil works.

But could the devil and his demons really be a reliable source of truth for the people who were gathered there? Isn’t the devil the father of lies – isn’t that what Jesus himself taught? So then how could anyone really trust what he said? Even though everything this demon said was true, he really only said it so that people might think twice about it or be scared by it or at least get the wrong idea about it. See, this demon was trying to publicly proclaim that Jesus came to be the long-promised Messiah, but remember that in those days, people expected the Messiah to be a political or military figure, an earthly ruler. Well, that’s not what Jesus came to be – his Kingdom is *not* of this world, right? – but if that demon could get that rumor started and get enough people into a mixed-up frenzy about it, then Jesus’ plans just might be foiled from the get-go.

And what’s maybe even more, it’s almost like this demon came here to challenge Jesus. When our text says, “*What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth?*” really what he means is, “What are you doing here? Why are you bothering us? Leave us alone and stay out of our business!” It’s almost like he was trying to convince the people that Jesus wasn’t really as powerful as he seemed, like Jesus and that demon were on the same level as equal adversaries, almost like that demon was threatening Jesus, “What are you going to do about it?!”

But all the bravado of that demon’s lies proved empty when Jesus called his bluff, because Truth doesn’t back down even from Satan himself. “*‘Be quiet!’ said Jesus sternly. ‘Come out of him!’*” Literally what Jesus says there is, “Muzzle yourself!” Put a sock in it! And what happens? That very moment, with a loud shriek that was truly that demon’s final whimper, out of that man he came. See, Jesus didn’t need any belabored arguments or incantations. This wasn’t some elaborate exorcism or hocus-pocus magic spell, like you hear in

stories or see on TV. No, that same One who spoke creation into existence was still all of creation’s Master, so Jesus gave a simple command, and it was done. Jesus wouldn’t hear another word that was meant to mislead those people about who he was and what he was there to do. It wasn’t that demon’s place to make those kinds of declarations. Jesus wanted people to come to their own conclusions about him based on *his* words and works, and that day he gave them some excellent material to consider, didn’t he. Jesus’ divine authority was on display there for everyone to see as he proved his power to save his people and even to overcome the forces of evil.

And in fact, that authority only proved itself more and more as time went on. Jesus proved that Truth doesn’t back down even as opposition from sinners and Satan only intensified. And even as Jesus was hung up on the cross and exposed to the devil’s final, most desperate attacks, there he fought and conquered sin and death and Satan forever and put their power to an end once and for all. And now, even though this kind of demon possession isn’t really a part of our experience anymore, we can still have the same confidence in Jesus’ total power over our demons, too. Whether it’s our pet sins like lusting or drinking or disrespect or discontent; whether it’s weakness for false doctrine or scientific attacks on the Bible; whether it’s personal struggles or illnesses or tragedies; whether it’s secret societies or anti-Christian groups or just our own sinful hearts telling us that we can never be good enough and God could never possibly love or save someone like us, the devil’s evil attacks still fall flat before the divine authority of our Savior and his Word of Truth. Yes, you *are* forgiven, you *are* justified, Paradise *is* yours, and your God will *never* leave you or forsake you or *ever* stop loving you – he has promised it, and he never lies to you. Yes, the devil may still try to push us around here, but friends, with the power of God’s Word and with the Spirit of Christ living and working inside of you, you can push back. He may be strong, but rest assured that he can harm no one who is protected by Him who is stronger, and our Lord Jesus never backs down when the welfare of his children is at stake.

You know, I’ve heard it said that the way you defend God’s Word is the same way that you defend a lion. You open its cage and let the lion take care of itself. God’s Word doesn’t need our defense, and it certainly doesn’t need our apology. It has inherent power and divine authority that come from our Lord Jesus Christ – he showed it in our Gospel lesson for today and he still shows it in our hearts and lives even now. No, Truth doesn’t back down – not from society, not even from Satan himself – because only God’s truth has the power to bring salvation to our souls and the authority to open heaven for our eternities. God grant it, for Jesus’ sake. Amen.