
What Possesses Us

Mark 1: 21 – 28

Rev. Dr. Benjamin J. Broadbent
The Community Church of Sebastopol

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I. Authority

When I was in college at Pacific University in Forest Grove, Oregon, I met a man who babbled truth.

By “babbled truth,” I mean only to convey respect.

Everything that came out of his mouth came from a place of authority by which I mean deep, lived wisdom.

His name was Wallace Black Elk, a Lakota Sioux leader and wisdom teacher, and a descendent of Nicholas Black Elk of “Black Elk Speaks.”

Along with several peers, participated in building a sweat lodge as a communal and spiritual practice.

While we built the sweat lodge, Wallace Black Elk talked about the land and the willows and the sun and the fire and Tunkashila, the Lakota word for creator.

He wasted no words, and I savored every word he uttered.

“Be careful with those willow branches,” I remember he said, “They are your grandmother’s bones. They will bend, but you must move slowly and listen to them.”

By the time the fire was lit, and we entered the dark womb of the lodge, I felt awash in truth, spoken across generations and cultures.

The Gospel writer Mark, writing in Greek, had a word for this kind of authority.

He called it exousia. Exousia. A prefix, ex, meaning out of, and a noun, ousia meaning essence or being.

To have authority means to speak and act out with exousia, out of one’s deepest essence or being.

When Jesus entered the synagogue in Capernaum to preach and to teach, the people were amazed because he spoke with exousia.

He spoke out the essence of his being.

A biographer of Wallace Black Elk observed that he had no book learning.

Instead, he learned from 11 spiritual elders, from the land itself, from the wisdom passed on by his culture, and from Mitakuye Oyasin, “all my relations,” the ancestors, the spirits, and all the creatures of the earth.

I imagine those who spent that Sabbath day with Jesus experienced him similarly to how I experienced the Lakota wise man.

A fresh word. Babbling truth. Time stands still. A wise one's exousia awakening the
ousia in all of us.

I try not to get defensive by Mark's comment that Jesus taught with authority and not
like the scribes.

We preachers are probably the closest thing to modern day scribes.

Educated. Exhibiting some expertise. Quoting scholars. Invoking scripture. Doing the
best to sound like we know what we're talking about.

Being a learned scribe isn't a bad thing, but it's not the same thing as having exousia.

Exousia does not correlate to education or even vocation.

Exousia means acting out of your essence. Children do this all the time.

Parents and grandparents and caregivers can easily think of times the children in their
lives exhibited exousia.

I've seen my daughter Sophia do it on the soccer field.

She she gets the ball and pours her entire self into running and dribbling and passing
and shooting.

It is powerful when a person's God-given essence fills their entire being and overflows
for the benefit of all.

That's how the people experienced Jesus at the synagogue that day.

II. Possession

But they weren't the only ones who noticed it.

Mark, using one of his favorite words, *eutheós*, meaning "immediately," disrupts the
story of Jesus' teaching with the abrupt entrance of a man with an unclean spirit.

The man cried out, "What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you
come to destroy us?"

It's a jarring scene. A scene of conflict and high emotion.

If I may, as one of the scribes-in-residence here at Community Church, I'd like to
unpack the scene a bit.

We are in the season of Epiphany, the season of uncovering, of revealing, of showing
forth.

These early stories in Mark as stories about epiphany about the revealing of Jesus'
identity and the nature of his ministry.

In the last scene before this one, Jesus preaches his first sermon and gathers some
disciples who recognize his power and wisdom.

Here he teaches in the synagogue and those who are there on the sabbath day
recognize his authority.

Now a man with a spirit recognize who Jesus is.

It's interesting to consider why the man speaks in the plural.

It's possible he's expressing the communal cultural aspect of the time.

He does not speak as an individual but for all the people.
Or it's possible that there is more than one spirit possessing this man.
There may be a multitude.

Think of the spirits that possess us today.

We are constantly bombarded by voices and advertisements and propaganda and conventions and biases that vie for our attention and insist that we obey.

100's of ads every day insisting our life will be better if we only buy what they're offering.

A politics of fear and division insisting on that the narrative we are telling ourselves can only be framed in terms of scarcity, of blue and red, of urgency and doom.

Biases about what is beautiful and right and true, and who is and isn't included in the common good, about whose voice is heard and body is seen.

During the course of this pandemic, I have observed the intersectionality of spirits coursing through our own church community.

The spirit of isolation has possessed many of us, as has the spirit of loneliness.

The spirit of scarcity has caused us to worry whether we will have enough resources to carry on.

The spirit of distrust has kept us from having hard conversations that will keep us connected.

Many have been possessed by a spirit of depression that leads to a spirit of helplessness that leads to a spirit of despair.

The spirit of grief has threatened to overwhelm us, especially when we lose yet another beloved and have no way to come together in safety to do the work of grieving.

Who knows what spirits possessed the man that day?

It could have been any of these.

Keep in mind that the region of Galilee was occupied by the Roman authorities, and by threat of violence they leaned on the population to work hard and pay taxes so that the Empire would prevail.

The man's spirit may have been the spirit of colonial occupation itself, which demeans and exhausts individuals and whole communities.

Exhausts the very essence, the *ousia*, of the people.

III. Come Out

It's remarkable that the spirits recognize Jesus of Nazareth, recognize that he is a threat to them, and recognize his deepest vocation.

"I know who you are," the man says, "the Holy One of God."

The spirits recognize Jesus and speak to him.
It's hard to know what their motivation was. To intimidate him? To disrupt his ministry?
To gain the upper hand?
We don't know, but I would suggest to you that the man came to the synagogue that day for the same reason you came to church today.
Because your life is the place where spirits battle it out.
Your life is a place of contention, of competing loyalties.
Your life, like mine, is an ambiguous life, a life up for grabs.
The conflict is between our deepest God-given essence, our ousia, and the secondary substances that constantly insist on our attention.
The man comes to the synagogue that day because he was possessed by spirits that were crowding out his ousia.
And when the spirits recognized Jesus and tried to call him out, Jesus spoke to the spirits, telling them to be silent, and to go on and get out of here.
Jesus spoke with exousia and even the spirits obeyed him.

IV. Follow Me

As we face new year in the life of our congregation, a question I have is "What possesses us?"
What spirits are constantly vying for our attention?
And how can we allow Jesus authority to speak to those spirits, to silence them, or at least to reduce their volume, and to call forth our deepest essence as individuals and as a community?

In the scene preceding this one, Jesus calls his first disciples with the words, "Follow me and I will make you fish for people."

I was thinking about Jesus' invitation, "Follow me."

I realized that it's possible to think that when Jesus says, "follow me" he means "Do what I do."

But I think he might be saying, "Go where I go."

Follow me into the fray. Come with me into the shadows. Join me in the midst of the menace.

And come as you are, not as you wish you would were.

Come conflicted and underconfident. Come naïve and hopeful.

For I will be with you always, turning down the volume on the spirits that diminish you, and turning up the volume on who God knows you to be.

Amen.