

**Beyond Spectacle**  
**A Sermon for Sardis Baptist Church**  
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**Mark 1:21-28**  
**1-28-2018**

Mark's gospel offers its readers a comparison of two worlds: the world we know now, and the world that God is bringing about. Jesus is the hero of the story. And from the start, Jesus makes clear that God's world, or God's realm is bursting into the present.

Last week, Jesus invited four disciples into God's world. And his invitation centered on the idea that God's economy is different from Herod's: God's economy values people over things. Jesus invites his disciples into discovering a world where God's love and God's creativity infuse God's children. And eventually, the authentic relationships created in the knowledge of God's love chip away at our needless pursuit of stuff. And these relationships beckon us to the fruitful pursuit of God and of one another.

Jesus says, "Follow me." And Andrew and Simon and John and James tag along to see what this new world is all about.

In today's lection, Jesus will continue to make clear distinctions between Herod's realm and God's realm. Last week it was all about currency: people or things. This week, it will be all about authority – By whose authority do we operate?

Before we jump in, let's think for a moment about that word authority.

Webster's Dictionary defines authority as: the power or right to give orders, make decisions, and enforce obedience. Synonyms include power, jurisdiction, command, control, and rule. Authority can also refer to a specific person or organization that has control or power.

Authority is engrained our lives. Sometimes we wield authority. We do so each time we make a purchase with our debit card – we authorize our bank to pay someone, because we are the owner of the funds to be transferred. We also wield authority when we sign permission slips for class field trips, or waivers for healthcare visits, or even an opt-in or opt-out form to receive the church's weekly email.

Other times, we submit or defer to authority. We trust Cherie Berry when she tells us the elevator we are riding in has been inspected; on most days, we agree to abide by the speed limit sign posted on Sardis Road; in most instances, we take seriously the counsel and judgment of our physicians, or elected leaders, or teachers, or employers.

Authority is not a foreign concept for any of us. And you won't be surprised to learn that authority was just as familiar for the people of First Century Palestine.

So, today's story begins. Jesus and his four new disciples head to the synagogue in Capernaum. It's Sabbath.

Now remember, as we mentioned last week, Jesus has no formal religious or academic training. He was a day laborer, who was called by God, and empowered and emboldened by the spirit. And I would tell you for certain that the pastor of First Baptist Capernaum didn't send him a pre-arranged invitation to

come and offer his testimony to the congregation. And if he/she did, I would tell you that FBC Capernaum might be forming an interim search committee shortly thereafter.

The synagogue would have been a place filled with scribes, learned men, who had spent years, if not decades studying Torah, debating its application, and formulating their own practical theologies. And when they spoke, their thoughts and ideas would be based on the authority of the time and precision they had dedicated to these texts.

So imagine their surprise, and that of the entire gathering, when in walks Jesus, and says, “Hey, I’ve got something to say!”

I think the text alerts us to that surprise. Because, Jesus, the most poignant, most concise person of our faith, had a lot of great things to say. But this passage doesn’t record a word of it. Not one word.

All we are told is that the crowd was amazed and astonished by the way Jesus spoke. He didn’t speak like the scribes. He spoke as if he possessed God’s authority.

And I want you to put yourselves in their shoes. Imagine that in the middle of our service, someone walked in, stopped me in mid-sermon, and said, “Listen up Sardis Baptist Church, I’ve got a message I’ve received from God, and I’ve got a sense of conviction and urgency, and I need to tell you this right away.”

Would you be astonished? Would you remember what this person had to say? Or would you be more focused on the question: “What right, or by what authority, does this person speak? “Who does he think he is?”

As the crowd wrestles with Jesus’ mysterious and audacious entrance, a man with an unclean spirit, someone whose life was controlled by evil forces, calls out to Jesus.

“Hey, I recognize you, Jesus of Nazareth. You are the Holy One of God! But what are your intentions? Have you come to destroy us?”

I think Mark’s point here is less a commentary on the man’s affliction, and more about the identification of Jesus. We live in a scientific world, and the idea of evil spirits might not be something that resonates with you. So think about the afflicted man in this way if it helps – Maybe he was filled up with greed, and control, and malice, and a thirst for power – he was a man afflicted by the non-God things in God’s world. And as strong a grip as those non-God things had on him, he could recognize in an instance that Jesus was of God, and that Jesus was a force and an authority that had much more power than what controlled him.

And Jesus loosens this man from the grip of such evil. But take note: In resolving the matter, in asserting his authority, Jesus doesn’t use a club, or handcuffs, or any means of violence or force; he doesn’t offer a writ; he doesn’t appoint a special counsel; he doesn’t send his henchmen to take care of it; he doesn’t construct a social media campaign to change public opinion.

Jesus asserts the authority God gives him. And that is enough. And oh by the way, it’s an authority that heals.

When he's done teaching, Jesus goes on to the next place that needs him.

And the crowd is still astonished. They've seen a man who teaches with God's authority, and yet has no need of PhDs or clerical collars for entry. And they've seen a man who has little regard for how it's always been done. And they've seen a man whose very presence calms evil spirits. And they've seen a man who is so audacious he heals on Sabbath. And they've seen one who claims authority in a way in which they've never known.

Dawn Ottoni Wilhelm warns the crowd, and us as well, not to be so enamored by the spectacle of these events. We're told that many in this room were astonished, and because of these events, Jesus' fame begins to spread.

But Wilhelm reminds us that fame and spectacle are not the same thing as faith. The events helps us take notice of Jesus' authority, and indeed they invite us to experience the wonder of such authority. But don't stop there she warns. There's more than spectacle.

And I have to tell you, Wilhelm's words stop me in my tracks. Because I, like you, have been witness to a modern spectacle – the utter nonsense that has permeated our nation's government for the past year.

Just like those folks in the Capernaum synagogue, we have been witness to a new kind of authority, one that dismisses any sense of tradition, and qualification, and credentials. One that's shaking things up.

But there is a major difference. Jesus will announce this new sense of authority, and next week, he'll head to Peter's house. And it will be more than spectacle. Jesus will heal, and teach, and preach, and develop relationships, and use his authority to empower, and embolden, and invite, and nurture, and encourage EVERY person he encounters to grasp God's authority for themselves, and help make God's world a reality here and now. In other words, Jesus will use God's authority to transform the world, you and me and all its parts, into the way God intended it to be. He'll do it today, and tomorrow, and the next day.

Friends, if we are to be like the Christ, if we are to experience the vastness of God's authority, we have got to stop being enamored with the spectacle of cheap, earthly authority. I am certain that authority without substance, no matter how flashy, is not really authority.

If we want to be like Jesus, we have to start being invested in the hard work of making God's authority more present, more valued, more apparent, more transformative, more compelling, more relevant. Now. Now. Now.

Sardis Baptist Church. The fireworks are over. Jesus shot off his best bottle rocket in church. And it was something to see. But now, he's heading on to do the hard work. He's going to Peter's house. I'm going with him. And next Sunday, I hope you'll come, too. Because I promise you, it'll be much more meaningful than spectacle. It'll be the first building blocks of a strong faith.

May it be so. And may it be soon. Amen.