

"as one with authority
Reading from the Old Testament: Psalm 111
Reading from the Gospels: Mark 1:21-28

Back in the bygone days when people traveled, the yen of many tourists making the pilgrimage to Israel was to walk where Jesus walked, which could be problematic for two reasons. First, when preachers like me encourage church folk to walk in the ways of Jesus, that's a metaphor, not a travelogue. Our hope is that our lives would imitate the self-giving love and abundant mercy of our Redeemer, which doesn't necessarily require a passport. That's not to say that a pilgrimage can't be transformative, but we're speaking more about a way of life than a tourist itinerary, more theology than geography (i.e., if you're a jerk before you board the flight to the Holy Land, there's a good chance you'll still be a jerk upon your return). Yet, when discipleship merges with destination, a sense of the sacred could certainly infuse your journey with meaning.

However, you may encounter a second complication with your desire to walk where Jesus walked; and that is in knowing **where** Jesus walked. Your feet can only take you as far as the archaeology indicates. As with most journeys through ancient history, there will be

any number of sites claiming an authenticity that is questionable if not impossible. In between Jerusalem and Jericho, you will find a site called *The Good Samaritan Inn*, commemorating Jesus' parable honoring a gracious Samaritan who offered care and provision to a wounded traveler. But Jesus was sharing a parable, not reporting an event.

Similarly, on the Mount of Olives, you can see a site called the Dome of the Ascension, commemorating the spot where tradition held that Jesus ascended into heaven. In the floor, there is even a framed rock that has been traditionally regarded as the last impression of Jesus' right foot on earth before he ascended into heaven. Yet, even the Gospel writers offer conflicting accounts as to where the ascension took place.

However, if you were to travel to Capernaum on the northwest shore of the Sea of Galilee, you will see a 4th or 5th century synagogue that archaeologists have excavated and rebuilt. And they determined that this synagogue was built upon the foundation of a 1st century synagogue which could well be where our text tells us Jesus entered, taught, and relieved a man from the burden of a debilitating and

demonic spirit. Thus, in an authentic way, you actually can walk where Jesus walked.

Mark reports, "They went to Capernaum; and when the sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught." By this time Jesus was no longer traveling alone. He had just gathered the four fishermen down by the sea who would become his first disciples. Capernaum was a fishing village of about 1500 residents that had been founded a little over a century earlier during the Hasmonaean dynasty, a time prior to Roman domination when Israel was relatively independent. Capernaum became a locus of Jesus' early activity in the region of Galilee. Simon and Andrew, those first disciples lived in the nearby village of Bethsaida, and in the original ending of Mark's gospel, it would be Galilee where the disciples were instructed to meet the risen Jesus.

At the time, it was customary in the life of the synagogue to allow visiting teachers to lead discussions on some text from the Torah, so it was not unusual for someone like Jesus to visit and teach in the synagogues of the villages to which he traveled. "They went to Capernaum; and when the sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and

taught. They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes."

Now, to be honest, as a preacher, I have a bit of a problem with this and feel compelled to say a word on behalf of the scribes. Every preacher knows the feeling. You're slogging away week after week, studying the sacred texts, seeking to compose a relevant, relatable, academically grounded interpretation of the scriptures for the members of your faith community. You neither sound like Edward R. Murrow nor look like Jared Leto, but you're there; you're present and accounted for; you're faithful.

And then? The guest preacher shows up. "Did you see her? What a commanding presence!" "That voice! He sounded like Christopher Plummer. She sounded like a young Katherine Hepburn." "It was like she was speaking directly to me." And you can always count on this one: "Did you notice? He spoke for 25 minutes and did not once look down at his notes!" Well, of course he didn't. He's been preaching that sermon for years in churches and at conferences all across the country. He could probably recite it backwards from memory. Sure, it is as though you've

never heard anyone like him before, because you have never heard him before!

Then, there is always the guaranteed reaction you get after Youth Sunday: "You had better watch out! She's gonna take your job." Okay, I'll give her a call next time the bathroom floods or we have to cut the budget. It's hers for the taking.

"They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes." I'm thinking the scribes are getting a bum rap here. Certainly not all, but at least some of them are just trying to be faithful servant leaders, hoping their efforts honor God and benefit the faith community. The scribes were the law professors in Israel, scholars trained to render reliable judgments on the meaning and application of the Jewish Law. As with jurists today, the scribes could run the gamut from conservative to progressive, from competent to craven, but they were generally regarded with respect and looked to for wisdom within the community.

However, with Jesus' visit to the Capernaum synagogue Mark is introducing us to something very different. This isn't just another

smooth-tongued, photogenic guest with the hefty resume and autographed book for sale out in the narthex. I'm sure it's the same in business or education with the conferences and workshops always featuring the same catalogue of trendy speakers time after time, as if we're all Grateful Dead groupies who will travel from city to city to hear those same songs once more. This guest in Capernaum's synagogue is different. We know this because Mark doesn't tell us the content of his teaching that day. So, it's not about his looks or his speaking voice. It's not about his publicity or what their neighbor had said about him. It's not about his teaching style or charisma. Rather, it is the singularity of his identity. Literally, there had been no one like this before. There would be no one like this afterward.

It's a *we're-gonna-need-a-bigger-boat* kind of moment, you know, that instant in the movie, *Jaws*, when Roy Scheider realizes that this shark is *beyond categorization*, something unearthly and never dealt with before. Perhaps you remember when Bobby Jones, golf's iconic gold-standard, saw an ascendant Jack Nicklaus play in his tournament, *The Masters*. Jones calmly said, "He plays a game with which I am not familiar." And yet, such laudatory praise falls mind-numbingly short

when describing what sort of different the Capernaum faithful were seeing in Jesus that day. As Karl Barth put it, “Jesus does not give recipes that show the way to God as other teachers of religion do. He is Himself the way” In the presence of Jesus we are facing nothing short of God. Victor Hugo said, “A cannonball travels only two thousand miles an hour; light travels two hundred thousand miles a second. Such is the superiority of Jesus Christ over Napoleon.”

Yet even Hugo's estimation is woefully inadequate, because the difference between earth's greatest minds and Jesus is not a matter of scale. *A Declaration of Faith* puts it this way: In the person and work of Jesus, God himself and a human life are united but not confused, distinguished but not separated. The coming of Jesus was itself the coming of God's promised rule." Theologian Stanley Hauerwas said, “Jesus is the parable of the Father's love given to transform us so that we might be drawn into the new creation called the kingdom of God.”

In reality, the people in the synagogue weren't throwing shade at the scribes. They were just observing the clear distinction between divine authority and human knowledge. "They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the

scribes." Jesus is Lord, not because of his eloquence, but because of who he is. In the scribes, we see those who can speak of God. In Jesus, we see God. The Elvis impersonator may dance better than Elvis, but... he's not Elvis.

A Declaration of Faith states, "Jesus Christ overthrew evil powers that enslaved and degraded people, yet he made no use of power to protect himself." As readers, we witness this in the Capernaum synagogue that day. "Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, and he cried out, 'What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God.' But Jesus rebuked him, saying, 'Be silent, and come out of him!' And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him."

We are not told the nature of this unclean spirit. We just know that being *unclean*, it effectively barred this person from worship, making him, in the eyes of those present, unwelcome. Yet, Jesus engages the man, not content to allow a barrier to stand between him and anyone. Interestingly, the only one present who clearly understands who this Jesus is, is the spirit torturing the man. Again,

we're not told the nature of this spirit, but we certainly know about the voices that can intentionally lure folks away from their best selves, away from the demands of love, away from that which is just, away from that which heals and toward that which injures and destroys. Regularly, we are conned by those voices, we are under the spell of those voices, and disturbingly, very often we are those voices of coercion, of hatred, of manipulation, of greed, of bigotry. We torture others and ourselves with words, resentments, grudges, venom, and injury.

Well, our text tells us that Jesus is not intimidated by the wreckage of the human spirit. Jesus has come to heal our brokenness. He is the embodiment of God's love. We are not told the nature of this unclean spirit. However, very often, we cannot articulate what troubles us, and in the grip of those spirits that plague us, we cannot see where things like love, peace, and healing are to be found, but we are pretty sure we're not there. Jesus knows the distance between where we are and where love is, because he's made this very journey to find us, clearing the storm-tossed detritus from the path that would hinder us, and holding out a hand to lead us.

When I was in middle school, we took a long road trip, visiting with relatives along the way and then traveling to Washington D.C. and Williamsburg, VA. I still remember the introductory film at the visitor's center in Williamsburg, the version starring Jack Lord, whose fame was mostly tied to Hawaii Five-O. This was the 70's after all. I half expected him with his tricorn hat, steely-eyed gaze, and iron jaw to face down the Redcoats, telling his lieutenant, "Book 'em, Danno!"

Anyway, once we checked into our hotel, we decided to walk to the historic area, only, after about a half-hour of walking we certainly weren't anywhere near the historic area, that is, unless Thomas Jefferson owned a pancake house. There we were, standing on a corner, my parents (ahem) *discussing* which direction to head when a kind woman in an old, well-used station wagon rolled down her window. "You look lost." Well, we couldn't fake it, we were lost, and in spite of our typical midwestern reticence to ever admit we could use some help, the woman gladly offered not just direction but a ride. My parents were embarrassed, I was grateful. Turns out, she was the spouse of a local pastor.

That memory comes to mind when I think about the countless times I've been lost, my mind captured by any number of burdensome spirits; and yet, the Spirit of Christ doesn't wait for me, but finds me, very often, in spite of me, and the burdensome spirits suddenly seem less burdensome on this guided journey toward the heart of love. I can find rest in Christ's authority, because he knows the way. Amen.