

# **A Sermon for DaySpring Baptist Church**

**By Eric Howell**

**Mark 1:21-28**

**February 1, 2009**

The congregation gathered for weekly worship and teaching like they always did. It would have been on a Friday evening. That's when the Sabbath started, right at sundown. The Sabbath—the Holy Day set aside for rest and worship—lasted until Saturday evening, but worship happened on Friday night. The congregation trickled in.

Likely there were all kinds of people there, just like always. Little kids running around. Moms shushing them, shuttling them over to where the women and children sat. The men spoke in hushed tones about business and work and their families. How the crops were doing and the latest run-in with the Roman tax collectors. As they entered the sanctuary, their conversations were muted. They entered holy space and their thoughts turned from the things of this world to the things of heaven.

Of course the things of this world and the things of heaven were never far apart. They didn't see the world as a dichotomy of spiritual and physical. It was God's world. It was holy land. It was sacred time. The scriptures that the rabbis taught had as much to do with how you washed pots and pans as with esoteric reflections on the eternal nature of the Unnamed Divine One. Perhaps Psalm 111 was read or sung, a poem that bridges the span between God's glory and our existence. "Praise the Lord! I will give thanks to the Lord with my whole heart, in the company of the upright, in the congregation. Great are the works of the Lord, studied by all who delight in them. He provides food for those who fear him.... The works of his hands are faithful and just.... His praise endures forever." Maybe they started that night with that as a call to worship.

They were generally and genuinely pleased to be there. They were open to receiving tonight's teaching from the Torah—the word of God—knowing that it would be instruction that would help them answer some riddle of life, some detail of existence. Details were important. The rabbi who taught would have known the scripture well and would have also known the history of interpretation of the scripture. As the great rabbis had instructed, teachers were to build a fence around the Torah. If the Torah says, "You shall honor the Sabbath and keep it holy," the teachers debated how far a man could carry a rock in his pocket on the Sabbath day without it being considered work and thereby violating the holiness of the day. They spent a lot of energy on those kinds of things. If the Torah said to wash your pan, they debated how many times you scrubbed to consider it washed. Good ol' Baptists can understand this. They've done the same thing in modern times. If the scripture says, "You shall not commit adultery," Baptists say, "You shall not dance." It's a border fence to keep you far, far away from trouble. So we get that. The congregation got that. And that's probably what they would get in tonight's teaching, a detailed lesson about a detail of scripture filtered through the details of oral tradition that would affect a detail of their lives. But they welcomed it. It was good for them. And they knew it. It was cauliflower. Tonight would be no different.

Tonight would be different. A guest teacher had come to town and come into the synagogue. The word on the street was that a few of the young men were really taken with him. History has not given us the substance of his teaching that night, but it has given us the response of those in the pews. They were astounded at his teaching. He was different. He taught as one with authority, not as the other teachers who stood to talk and relied on the teachings of others to support their postulations. He stood on his own feet. He talked about God like he knew what he was talking about. They were amazed.

What if the synagogue in the gospel story represents our inner being? Like Jesus entered the synagogue that night, he enters our lives and finds us for the most part glad he's there. In fact, we welcome him in. Our conscience serves as something like the hometown rabbi, who says to Jesus, "Come on in, we'd like to hear what you've got to say." And we listen to his teaching. And it is pleasing to our ears.

Sometimes it's astounding. Sometimes it's amazing. And like all the different kinds of people in the pews gathered in one place in the synagogue, each of us deep within is a congregation of experiences, strengths, weaknesses, places of resolute faithfulness, and dark spots of shame. We are a crowded marketplace, a busy intersection of voices from our past, regrets and accomplishments, loves lost and loves gained. We are a roundabout of pushes and pulls, hopes and dreams, fears, and anxieties. We are all of these things. Remember the little hand game for kids—here's the church, here's the steeple, open the doors and here are the people. Each of us is this church with a steeple visible to the world, but if you open the doors to our souls, you see a teeming congregation. It is before this congregation inside of us that Jesus stands. And all the little parts of our lives delight when Jesus talks and teaches us.

The child in us loves it when Jesus tells his disciples to stop being so full of themselves and welcomes the little children to come to him. We are amazed when Jesus says, "The kingdom of God belongs to little children."

The rich young ruler in us is humbled and astonished when Jesus says that it's easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.

The parts of our lives that are blind love the new vision Jesus brings. The parts of our lives that are lame love that Jesus makes us strong. The parts of our lives that are deaf love that we are given new ears to hear.

The sacrificing parts of us secretly love it when Jesus honors the widow who gave a mite over the religious leaders who gave from their bounty.

The hopeful part of us sits up when Jesus says, "If you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to a mountain, get up and throw yourself into the sea, and it will do it."

The lonely, worried, anxious parts are comforted by, "Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age."

Jesus' words and Jesus as the Word of God are welcomed in our souls. We're glad he's here. Most of us. Most of the time. But sometimes and in that deep dark place in our souls that we don't like to talk about or acknowledge, we resist him.

In most of us Jesus finds a mixed bag of faithfulness and eager acceptance—and resistance and sometimes outright hostility. We are reminded today that Jesus is not simply a benign, friendly teacher finding welcome before a cheering audience, not even within ourselves. When he speaks to the congregation of our soul, his authority challenges that in us which is not of God. And we lash out.

We like his presence in our lives. We don't like to hand over our lives to him. We like his powerful words. We resist his power and authority over us. Mark describes a man with an unclean spirit for whom Jesus' presence was not a welcome blessing but a threat to his continued existence. We have places in our own lives that are unclean and resist the new authority of Christ.

All of our unclean spirits cry out in desperation, "What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us?" It's a strange question, isn't it? Jesus is the one who mends, not tears, the one who repairs, not breaks, right? No, not really. Jesus is one who does in us exactly what needs to be done to bring us closer to God.

The demonic spirit understands more clearly than anyone else the decisive significance of Jesus. "What have you to do with us?" It is from the areas of our lives that most exemplify selfishness, pride, and vanity that we most fully understand what the stakes are to following the way of Jesus. It means change. And it is there where we make our final stand. "You can come in here, but don't rearrange the furniture. I won't let you change me."

It's not a lack of understanding Jesus. In these areas of our lives, we totally understand what's at stake and with whom we are dealing. "I know who you are—the Holy One of God." In his commentary on the passage, William Lane points out that what demons call Jesus is different from what people call Jesus. People name Jesus in the Gospel of Mark as "Lord," "Teacher," "Son of David," or "Master." Demoniacs, however, address Jesus as "the Holy One of God," "the Son of God," or "the Son of the Most High God."

"I know who you are, Jesus of Nazareth; you are the Holy One of God." In naming Jesus for who he fully is—divine and human—a defensive attempt is made to gain control over Jesus in accordance with the common concept of the day, that the use of the precise name of an individual of spirit would secure mastery over him.

Likewise, we attempt to master Jesus by formulating all sorts of ways to control his influence and power in us. We think that by describing Christ through predictable, calm and safe religious acts and academic theories, we can somehow neutralize the raw power that he wields. By using him as a mascot for our political ideology, we can aim him like a weapon at other people. Yesterday, I saw the message, "Jesus is Lord," on the mud-flap of the rear tire of an eighteen-wheeler rolling down the road. I appreciated not having rocks and mud slung on my car, of course, but I had to wonder who, in some marketing department somewhere, decided that this dangerous, life-altering confession of surrender and submission would belong, all but forgotten, splattered with mud and muck, as a worn-out slogan. Then I figured whoever came up with it probably got the idea sitting in church, where we do exactly same thing.

We are mistaken to forget with whom we are dealing. We are misguided to appreciate the words and not take account of the man. We are shortsighted to see the man and not see God in the man.

Other men went around claiming to be healers and exorcists, but Jesus used no technique, no spells or incantations, no symbolic act. Only his word—and that was enough. “Be silent!” And it was. And, “Come out of him!” And it did. When people encounter Jesus, they encounter a power that is greater than they are.

In my heart there is an assembly of brokenness and resistance to Jesus that requires his absolute authority and power in me. There’s everyone he ever met. There are enemies of Christ all through my heart and life. And these enemies are ruthless and cunning. There is an unclean spirit that needs to be cast out; and there is a Pharisee who needs to learn grace; and a Sadducee who needs courage. There is an Essene who needs to love. There is a zealot who needs to practice peace.

And there’s a little boy in me that is sometimes willing to give the little I have to the One who can use it to feed the multitudes. In me there is a lame man, a blind man, a deaf man that all cry to be healed. But also within me is a disciple who follows Jesus along the road, not really understanding where we’re going, but committed to following.

And then there’s within my heart the Roman soldier, with all his armor, sword, and shield and human strength. A centurion who unwittingly yet willingly crucifies Jesus Christ. In me, in the very center of my soul, there stands all my own human strength and wisdom defying anyone to be Lord but me. But he sees Jesus and is astonished. At the cross my strength is weakness and my wisdom is foolishness. He looks up at him on the cross and speaks for all the voices in my soul—those who welcome Jesus and those who resisted him, “Truly this man was the Son of God!” And at this confession the whole congregation within me goes still and takes a knee.