

# SERMON SUPPLEMENTAL

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## ++KEY IDEA OF THE WEEK++ GOD'S WORD HAS AUTHORITY

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**This Week's Readings:** Deuteronomy 18:15-20; Psalm 111; 1 Corinthians 8:1-13; Mark 1:21-28

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### READINGS IN A NUTSHELL

God's Word has great and ample power! It was His Words that brought about Creation, humanity, and all living things. It is His Words that brings reality into life and visions into eventuality. God's Word is the ultimate source of all knowledge and all living things.

That is why St. John begins his Gospel with an expounding on the power of God's Word and all the implication of its power. This week's texts give us an insight into what God's Word means and what true power it beholds.

In the Deuteronomy text for this week, we happen to enjoin God's speech in the middle of His instruction to the Levite tribe, a tribe of priests. He is warning them about what it means to be prophets and be the mouthpiece of His Words.

To moral of the Deuteronomy text is one should be cautious to never been irresponsible or careless when speaking on behalf of God. The power of His Word is too weighty to be spoken without necessary deliberations and humbleness.

In the Gospel of Mark, Jesus is beginning His Ministry and he ventures into his home synagogue (I assume since he grew up near there). He preaches a message that blows their intellectual and spiritual brains away. He impresses the worshippers with his authoritative power in his preaching and teaching.

Then a demon possessed man came into the worship space. Jesus had already impressed the worshippers with his preaching ability, but he was about to send them into outer space with astronomical astonishment. Jesus removes the demon from the poor man. The spectacle of the convulsions and crazy speech from the demon emanating from the man must have scared all who were present. However, it was Jesus's instruction to the demon to "Be silent and come out of him!" that left all present breathless and speechless.

The point our texts this week concentrated on was the Authority of God's Word. Moses spoke with authority and Jesus preached and healed with great authority.



### THINKING MORE DEEPLY

After the calling and gathering of disciples along the Sea of Galilee, the scene shifts quickly to Capernaum, a nearby urban center on the north shore of the sea. On the Sabbath, Jesus enters the synagogue where he proceeds to teach. The congregation is amazed by his teaching. Mark notes the development of an immediate tension. Jesus teaches as one with authority and not as one of the scribes ([Mark 1:22](#)). Here, Jesus is portrayed as a prophetic figure over against the regular scribal task of interpreting the law.

Jesus' entrance into the sacred space to proclaim God's reign prompts a confrontation with a man with an unclean spirit. In Mark's Gospel, the demon-possessed, ill, and outsiders are those who recognize Jesus as God's messenger. In this episode, Jesus' teaching prompts the man with the unclean spirit to speak truth aloud: Jesus is the Holy One of God ([Mark 1:24](#)). The exorcism in the synagogue on the Sabbath foreshadows a controversy over the proper religious actions by faithful Jews on the day of rest. Jesus will be accused of breaking the law by engaging in a series of Sabbath exorcisms and healing.

Furthermore, his contact with the demon-possessed and sick continually violates the purity codes that separate the holy and righteous from the unclean.

Contemporary readers of this text are often puzzled by the strange images of demonic possession and exorcisms. Interpreters often attempt to provide rational explanations in terms of first-century healing and medicinal practices or offer metaphorical and symbolical literary images. Rather than attempt to explain this text to listeners, it is more helpful to examine what is at stake in this text for Mark (and for us). From the very beginning of Jesus' public ministry, Mark wants his audience to recognize that this will be a cosmic struggle. Jesus' declaration that God's reign is near is immediately met by resistance. While the congregation in Capernaum may show signs of curiosity, the message is heard and recognized by the man with the unclean spirit as one that challenges the status quo: "What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth?" (v. 24).

Biblical scholars differ on their interpretations of the use of the plural "us" by the man who cries out. Some regard it as a

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reference to the congregation, with the man speaking in solidarity with the congregation. C. S. Mann suggests that its usage parallels typical expressions in encounters between Old Testament prophets and their audience. In contrast, Ched Myers argues that in the sacred space of the synagogue, the demon expresses the point of view of the scribal establishment. However one may decipher the details of this passage, it is clear that for Mark this initial exchange represents the struggle between Jesus' ministry of healing and reconciliation and the established practices of religious communities and authorities.

The cry of the man with the unclean spirit is a recognition that Jesus as God's Holy One is a threat to the ways things have always been done. "Have you come to destroy us?" the demon-possessed man calls out (v. 24). The exorcism is an act of destruction, a spiritual housecleaning in the most unlikely of places. The synagogue, as symbolic sacred center of the community, will not be the same. Jesus brings not only a new teaching, but a new way of acting that commands authority.

Several aspects of this narrative may help to illumine the text. First, the role of religious assembly as a place of both authority and conflict. While churches may no longer stand at the center of culture, they remain significant places of exchange where the possibility remains for truth telling and discovery. Second, the inclusion of the man with an unclean spirit in the synagogue setting suggests the importance of the church's ministry to the unclean, outsiders, and the estranged.

Finally, the church is invited into this narrative in order that we may engage in the cosmic struggle that lies at the center of the gospel. Following Jesus is about challenging power structures that exclude and marginalize people. Taking up this work requires a willingness to speak and act out against the powers and principalities of our day and age. Let me offer one small

example: in the wake of the tragedy of 9/11, the congregation where I served decided to open the doors of our building and welcome people into the sanctuary where they could gather to pray, grieve, and meditate. Each morning, we unlocked the doors so that neighbors and strangers could come in. Voices of opposition were quickly raised: a homeless person might steal something or it was unsafe for the day care center that was housed in our building. The simple act of opening the doors of the church was perceived as a threat to maintaining our property and protecting our belongings. Change and openness challenged the security and sanctity of our property. In the end, the church doors were locked again. As a congregation, we could not find a way to extend the hospitality to the stranger and outcast who would likely disrupt our patterns and expectations. This is but one small example of the daily battles that pastors and congregations face as they seek to move the church from the way things have always been done to an understanding of church as a center that welcomes people to explore ways to hear and respond to the gospel.

It is helpful to note that Mark outlines the conflict in this setting in order to show how the conflict in the synagogue advances the spread of the gospel. This first public episode in Capernaum prompts the participants to recognize Jesus as one who brings a new teaching—with authority (v. 27). It is an authority that is demonstrated by Jesus' act of exorcism. The power of evil is on the run when it faces up to Jesus! This is the good news in word and action. It is a word and work that amazes, excites, and astounds all who are present to witness it. This event is so powerful that the participants quickly spread the word about Jesus throughout Galilee. How can our events that proclaim and enact the gospel spread the good news of the gospel in our neighborhoods? Likewise, how can the conflict in our congregations prompt reflection and action that make room for the gospel to take root in our communities?

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## THEOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS

"You have shown your people the power of your works in giving them the lands of the nations" (Ps. 111:6). Though comforting if spoken to people dispossessed of their land or maybe exploited, landless peasants, when heard by the Indigenous peoples of the world from the mouths of the colonizers who have stolen their land, this verse gives nothing but anger, terror, and despair. In their book *Unsettling Truths: The Ongoing Dehumanizing Legacy of the Doctrine of*

*Discovery*, Mark Charles and Soong-Chan Rah write how European-American colonizers saw passages like this as "reflecting the belief that [the young United States had] the God-given right to rule the entirety of the North American continent" and millions of Indigenous Americans died because of it (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2019, p. 101). And since triumphant texts like this are common in scripture, how can they be preached in light of their history with Indigenous people in your neighborhood? Is it possible for people from a "settler culture" like ours to use them at all?



## AROUND THE TABLE

In Deuteronomy, God promises to raise up a prophet like Moses, who will speak for God; in Psalm 111, God shows the people the power of God's works. For the church, these are ways of pointing to the unique authority people sensed in Jesus' actions and words. We encounter that authority in God's word, around which we gather, the word that prevails over any lesser spirit that would claim power over us, freeing us to follow Jesus.

1. When did you recently experience God's grace and mercy? (Ps 111:4)
2. How have you shared or experienced love that builds up? (1 Cor 8:1)
3. How does Jesus' divine authority help us reflect on the nature of today's political authority? (Mark 1:22, 27)
4. Paul speaks of sovereign freedom (1 Cor 8:9), similar to Jesus' authority to serve humanity. How can we do likewise?