

Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany

Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time

DEUTERONOMY 18:15-20

PSALM 111

I CORINTHIANS 8:1-13

MARK 1:21-28

January 28, 2024

Authoritative Authority!

One with authority! Yes, that phrase is a double entendre, a double meaning clearly implied, and both meanings surely apply to Jesus! So, what does it mean to have authority, to be authoritative, to speak as one with authority, to speak as one who has authority? What does it mean to be one with authority? What did it mean in Jesus' day, if it meant something different than it does now? And let us be clear from the outset here, having an aura of authority, being authoritative, has nothing to do with its negative connotation, authoritarianism, a blatant perversion of what really is a solidly positive image. So close, and yet so far! Those who are authoritative never need to call attention to themselves, never have to engage in any self-aggrandizement in whatever role they play. Jesus never claimed titles for himself, any of them, none of them, including the assessment boldly pronounced in Mark's Gospel that he spoke as one with authority, as one who had authority. Jesus had no need to claim his authority because the Gospel writers and those on the ground at the time did that for him! The ones in the congregation who witnessed his stuff, who could give their personal, jaw-dropping, testimonials, knew and knew full well, having no doubt whatsoever that Jesus had the capacity, that Jesus exuded authority, his very presence demanding rapt attention from those gathered before him! Being authoritative deflects being haughty or "puffing up" as the Bible says, exuding maturity. As a prerequisite it demands acting like an adult, no need for attention grabbing tantrums to make a point. In other words, man-babies need not apply, or as MSNBC legal analyst Neal Katyal calls it "entitled toddlers." Autocrats and dictators need not bother! Jesus set the standard and is the standard, yes, setting a very high bar that takes a lot of work for any who might dare make or own that claim, who would risk climbing that proverbial ladder. Wielding authority, or having it, is very appealing, never appalling! I have always wanted to get that line in a sermon! It is alluring, compelling, intoxicating, inspiring in so many ways at so many levels. To paraphrase a paragraph about love in I Corinthians 13 (4-7), yes, putting a new twist on an old text, authority "is patient; authority is kind, authority

is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. Authority does not insist on its own way; authority is not irritable or resentful; authority does not rejoice in wrongdoing but rejoices in the truth. Authority bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.”

Obviously, the writer of the Gospel of Mark thought that being authoritative was something important, significant, perhaps even novel, in every way, because the Markan storyteller claims Jesus’ authority not only once, but twice, within a matter of the seven verses we have before us in the Gospel lection for today as the Jesus story begins to unfold and gain momentum, his audience building with a defining crescendo found in every profound word. As we move further into another yearly lectionary journey together through the life of Jesus, this year being Year B on the liturgical calendar, we look through the lens of Mark, learning from his unique perspective, this account being the briefest and least detailed of the four Gospels. As with any text from the biblical narrative we are quickly forced to make interpretive decisions based on the way any of us interpret and understand the Bible, any approach we take with what we consider to be a holy book. Offering what I like to call the “Reader’s Digest” version of the Gospel legends, these legendary Gospels, we are confronted with Mark’s depiction describing his version of the first miracle attributed to Jesus, the Gospel of John no doubt begging to differ. After all, we have in the Johannine story the fantastic, fabulous, tale about turning water into wine at the beginning of what is by far the most theologically infused treatise of all the four Gospels. What we quickly see in Mark is that authority comes by virtue of a spoken word, that even the demonic, a demon having rudely interrupting Jesus’ musings during worship, even the demons dutifully respond in obedience to this teacher who already seems to stand out as a most unorthodox rabbi, breaking the mold in every way imaginable. As we make our homiletical journey today, we pick up with a story in progress as we find Jesus at home in the synagogue preparing to teach a lesson on the Sabbath, evidently a part of Jesus’ rabbinical routine as the teacher offered his unique perspective, his commentary on the text chosen for that day. In that act alone, we learn much about this proclaimed prophet from Nazareth, the tradesman carpenter Jesus, Joseph and Mary’s boy made good, hailing from this enclave located in the little renowned country of Galilee. **It is a good guess, most likely, that already at this point in time, based on its location at the beginning of the Gospel as a pivotal bellwether moment, that Jesus had amassed a following. It also seems readily apparent, clearly obvious, that by now Jesus was fully accepted into the club by the religious leadership, meaning the Pharisees and Scribes among others. He was also embraced by the rank and file like a breath of fresh air, proving to be more than**

capable, an outstanding orator and teacher, and thus an informed interpreter of the Law and the Prophets. No doubt there was some jealousy, perhaps a bigger crowd, whenever Jesus chose to speak! He was in his place not out of place as he taught in the synagogue.

Two things confront us as we dive into this text. The first is that we must come to terms with whatever we think about the miraculous, specifically how we view the miracle stories found throughout the Bible but are particularly prevalent in the Gospels. At some point we are forced to make a call about what we believe these purportedly miraculous events mean. One solution, which can be used as a crutch, perhaps a copout, is that we boldly declare that we believe by faith these mysterious episodes that challenge our imagination and our intellect, thus somewhat assuaging, satisfying our curiosities. Making this kind of polite proclamation allows us to skip, to take a pass, gives us permission to avoid any critical analysis, any crisis of faith, associated with the literal/mythological dilemma that always is part and parcel of our engagement with scripture. We can simply, wistfully, say, owning an inherent naivete, that “there but by the grace of God go I!” Ask and answer! Problem solved! Yes, it is true that we presumably walk by faith and not by sight, but God expects us to use our brains in doing so! A mind is a terrible thing to waste, especially in the religious arena! Secondly, and solving this nonissue is quite a bit easier. We must also wrestle with the idea of the existence of literal demons, the evil spirits that were so pervasive in the anthropomorphic prescientific mindset of those who occupied the ancient world, confrontations with demonic presences a routine part of Jesus’ and his contemporaries’ experience. Yes, demons **were an ever-present reality**. Yes, they were omniscient, omnipresent, and very powerful, never omnipotent, however! Demons, just like the Spirit, were an existential threat that had to be ameliorated, yes exorcised. Yes, according to the biblical narrative Jesus was an exorcist, and evidently an excellent exorciser, the portrayals in the Gospels no doubt fueling much contemporary cinematography, including the classic, quintessential 1973 cult classic exorcist movie, *The Exorcist*. Linda Blair’s rotating head and vomiting pea soup are images forever graphically etched in our minds! Obviously over the centuries this ancient threat became a much easier problem for rational human beings to solve because scientifically, according to the laws of science, we now know so much, able to access volumes of informative materials about psychology. Humans have unlocked many of the once illusive secrets regarding the kinds of mental illnesses that once masqueraded as demon-possession and led to horrific abusive experiments and treatment of human Guinea pigs locked away for good in sanitoriums all around the world.

Describing this text, R. Alan Culpepper notes that “this section confronts modern interpreters with several difficult issues: Did Jesus perform miracles, and if so how do we interpret them for our skeptical age, and, related, how do we interpret demons in the twenty-first century? Both are difficult issues since they have clear implications for one’s view of the nature of Scripture and one’s understanding of Jesus . . . The view taken here is that Jesus shared the worldview of his time . . . the Gospels reflect the worldview of the first century . . . The understanding of the world that was common in ancient Mediterranean culture was that natural processes and events that affect human life are subject to fate and controlled by spiritual forces. In place of a scientific understanding of cause and effect and intermediate causes, ancients looked for ultimate, direct, and divine or demonic causes. If one were sick, it was because a capricious divine being or malicious demon had caused it.”¹ This prescientific world really was a simple and simplistic world! Culpepper adds, “The competing worldviews of our time are generally not based on superstition and magic but on science and technology.”² Relying on the demonic as literal personas that possessed human-like qualities while possessing their unsuspecting victims, such as the metaphorical devil or Satan, spawned by the serpent figure in the Adam and Eve saga, not so much anymore. Yes, the dramatic effect caused by factoring the scientific equation, with all the discoveries of science, now informing and impacting our faith, adds a layer of serious contemplation to our understanding of the cosmos. That which we historically once took for granted and erroneously understood by the accidental members of the flat earth society, no fault of their own, to be found within the realm of normal, accepted as factual information, humans now view very differently than did our forebears in the faith. Culpepper then gets to the crux of the matter, the crisis of faith before us, offering what many doubters, skeptics, and cynics today would quickly claim for themselves and for the universe “If God served as the explanation for all that we could not explain, then—because we are now confident that we will eventually be able to explain everything by natural process—God no longer has any place or function: God is unnecessary.”³ And I think I can safely speak for most, if not all of us, when I declare with utmost certainty that this posture does not work in our lives as people who, despite contemporary trends to the contrary, continue to believe, to believe and live by faith. Against a pervasive tide of atheism, agnosticism, and “nonism”. “Nones”, who tend to be male according to one source, is a new category all its own for those who

¹R. Alan Culpepper, “Mark,” in *Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary*, ed. R. Scott Nash, Smyth & Helwys Publishing Company, Inc., Macon, GA: 2007, 67.

²*Ibid.*, 70.

³*Ibid.*, 68.

have no religious affiliation but do not want to be labeled with the aforementioned atheists or agnostics. Somehow, for whatever reason, we are the remnant who have held to, not rejected, the faith handed down to us by our spiritual fathers and mothers, refusing to throw the proverbial baby out with the bathwater! Again, in the words of Culpepper, “The question the interpreter should start with is not whether the miracles are historical but what they mean.” Indeed, “the miracles invite us to live in a world over which God is sovereign and to have faith that God is indeed sovereign over the world in which we live.”⁴ And of course, the once inarguable but now questionable sovereignty of God is always up for debate as we consider not only its relevance, but its profound implications for our lives and as we ponder the mysteries of the universe, the idea, the image, of mystery intended. An overarching question before us according to Culpepper and I would concur, “Is there a God, and if so who is God?”⁵

So, back to our original questions about authority, what is it and how do we know it when we think we see it, hear it, or experience it? First, we are going to talk about what by all indications makes all this Gospel stuff authoritative, perhaps a key to answering the broader question about all things authoritative. Our Bible Study group has been discussing the making of the Canon and the reasons that some were voted in because they were believed to be authoritative, and others rejected because they did not get that stamp of approval. Ya’ll come! Relying on Culpepper one more time, yes, I sense a trend here, there are some foundational planks associated with, not only this miracle story, but all the stories about Jesus, a hidden structure that speaks to eternal meaning, yes, images of eternal import, eternity being the operative word here. This miracle story follows a common pattern including five aspects therein that includes a description of the need for said miracle; Jesus’ response with a word accompanied by an action; the effect of the rabbi’s intervention; the confirmation that a miracle just occurred, verified by the witnesses present who could attest to its power and beauty; and finally, the profound reaction by those same witnesses as they spontaneously offered their amazed awe and praise. The miracle stories then include five accompanying functions. The first serves a *theological function*, signs of the power and glory of God in the midst of that incredible, crucible, moment in time; the second serves a *Christological function*, the miracles affirming who Jesus was claimed to be; the third serves a *hermeneutical function*, these stories placing Jesus in a direct line with “the Law and the Prophets,” indicating that he came not to abolish, but to fulfill the Law; the fourth serves a *kerygmatic function* in that the miracles “demonstrate the power of

⁴Ibid., 68.

⁵Ibid., 70.

Jesus' word" as an authoritative preacher and teacher prophetically proclaiming his mission and ministry; and finally, the fifth serves a *didactic function* as they offer a lesson on discipleship, offering the always necessary devotional, spiritual, hook that takes all this material from great information to application.⁶

It is a given, or at least I think that it is, that we accept as a premise that these Gospel stories are authoritative while affirming that Jesus was authoritative. The inquiry then becomes a matter of determining what do these things mean for us today, how do we read, how do we interpret and understand? Eternal questions! I guess I would begin a conversation by arguing the point that whatever authority and authoritative is that it begins and ends with truth as best we can intuitively acknowledge and affirm it. Our world today seems to be reveling in a lack of common sense, celebrating unhinged crazy, idiocy, and stupidity, reveling in individual and mass ignorance, absolute lunacy, all conspiracy laced and proudly worn as a badge of honor, something about which we can brag. There is nothing authoritative in anything that is false, any deceit that is bound to the heaviest weight of what has become known as fake news, alternative facts. Dishonesty is deadly, if not demonic, to humanize that term! Nothing about Jesus was ever inauthentic, lacking in a genuine vulnerability, open and transparent, in his overwhelming presence. While his message raised eyebrows for the religiously pious and powerful, Jesus' integrity was never called into question. As we would say, his word was his bond! With Jesus, everyone knew where they stood in any conversation no matter the complexity or controversy. With Jesus, what you saw was what you got, yes, openness and transparency guiding the way he lived his life and the way he suffered his death. There was no gray, no waffling, no iffy kinds of fence straddling allowing him any verbal escape mechanism. He was never lukewarm, the proverbial milk toast, in no way whatsoever a moderate, but his clarity and conviction, his clarion call made him not only a target but appropriately cast him as a polarizing, perhaps and probably as a political, figure! You could take it or leave it! And you made that decision based on the content of his message and meaning was. In our Bible Study class, we have discussed the irony about Jesus' inclusive message. He was smart enough to know that his open invitation, his hospitable welcome and inclusion, was not for everyone, that many would sadly turn away after considering the substantial cost. He invited all people but knew that only those who could see, those who had insight, and those who could hear, those who knew how to listen, would be willing, would dare and choose the narrow pathway of door number different and take up a cross and follow. That somewhat explains why Jesus declared that many are called,

⁶Ibid., 68-70.

but few are chosen (Matthew 20:16; 22:14)! Jesus' words had authority because they were backed up by, supported by, actions that were the proof of the pudding of what he claimed and who and what people claimed him to be. Authority never reveals its essence simply based on someone's most eloquent, most well-articulated opinions. Everybody has an opinion! One thing we have learned is that all opinions are not created equal, that they do not have equal value. Jesus' words resonated because he cared and because he was compassionate. Jesus took the time to listen as if his was an audience of one, listening as if that person were the only person on the planet in that suspended moment in time. Perhaps being authoritative demands patience and Jesus had the patience of Job! Jesus' actions, feeding, quenching, healing, raising, engaging, forgiving, gracing, loving and so on, showed those with whom he related that he truly was in a real and hopefully lasting relationship with them and that he truly sought to enhance their wellbeing. In other words, his actions, his deeds, his works, what he did, showed his authoritative prowess, that he was one with authority! What a gift, a gift that kept on giving, every time he spoke and every time he acted. It still does! Perhaps therein is the key, the hint to all of us as his followers, reminding each and every one of us that actions speak louder than words!

In an article titled "Losing Our Religion? (no doubt stealing a line from an old REM song) Why More Americans Are Turning Away from Their Faith" Tess Bonn observes that if "your church looks less crowded these days? You're not alone!"⁷ It is another of the numerous articles written about the decline of mainline denominations and her churches. She says that "today, religiously unaffiliated people make up the single largest cohort in the country," that "28 percent of Americans don't identify with any religion. . . up from 16 percent in 2007. She says that "traditional hierarchies and rules," church scandals or trauma, and of course politics—don't get me started—have led to "general disenchantment with religion as a whole."⁸ I would suggest that boredom with certain mindless traditions, and that has little if nothing to do with worship styles, any of which can be stimulating and stirring or stifling and suffocating. I would also suggest that dogma and doctrine, creedal pronouncements parroted by parishioners like robots as if in a trance, ritual by note and rote, and yes, historically rubberstamped patriarchal hierarchies demanding fundamentalist ecclesiologies and theologies all have gotten us to this crisis, a place the Church never assumed it would be. But I would also suggest, and I am taking advantage of our discussion today, our homiletical conversation, that the Church, for a host of reasons has lost its authoritative voice and therefore its

⁷ Tess Bonn, "Losing Our Religion? Why More Americans Are Turning away from Their Faith," Katie Couric Media, info@katiecouric.com.

⁸Ibid.

relevance. As John Shelby Spong once said, paraphrasing here, the heart cannot accept or embrace what the mind cannot believe. While it is an oversimplification, I think an entryway, and we are well on our way at First Congregational, to becoming vibrant and vital, to sustaining vibrance and vitality, to be relevant and relational, is to deeply and wholly, yes, to holistically, embrace the gospel characteristics of a local missional church. What it means is that our being and our doing, our doing and our being, square with one another, that they are balanced and match in as high a degree as possible. It means that we practice what we preach and that we preach what we practice, every day, every time, all the time.

In the name of the One who creates, redeems, and sustains, and expects us to speak as those with authority, our words always speaking truth to power and to everyone else! Amen and amen!