

## **A Storytelling Commentary on Mark 1:21-28**

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This is the first story of Jesus acting on his authority as the anointed Son of God, as the one whom John the Baptist announced as the Messiah. If you think about the stories of the messiahs, Saul and David, the first thing that they did after their inauguration is to rally the men of Israel for battle and to defeat the enemies of Israel. Jesus is also anointed at his baptism and he rallies the men of Israel. But in Jesus' story he calls four fisherman and he goes into battle, not against the Philistines, but against the unclean spirits. He goes into battle against the spirits of the powers of evil. He defeats them not by warfare, but by his calm authority and his power over the spirits of evil. This story immediately reframes the nature of Jesus' authority and power and what it means that he is the Messiah.

The exorcism raises the question as to whether this man was mentally ill or whether he was possessed by a demon. Clearly in the story Jesus' action is presented as an exorcism, as the casting out of a demon. But to be possessed by an unclean spirit describes someone whose spirit was deformed. Today we might call such a person mentally ill but we also recognize that spiritual deformation is a much more widespread condition that affects everyone. In this case the evil spirit is malevolent, disruptive and rejoiced in doing wrong. Jesus demonstrates his authority over the powers of evil, in this case in the unclean spirit, by addressing this spirit directly and commanding it to leave the man.

In telling this story there are three characters who have to be presented: Jesus, the man, and the people in the synagogue. In the story the first is the man with the unclean spirit, who recognizes Jesus and starts yelling at him. The second is Jesus. The storyteller says clearly that the man cried out. So it is important to make his words really loud. The second character you present as the storyteller is Jesus. Jesus' rebuke does not have to be loud, but rather confident, calm and with authority. There is no tone of anger or even hostility implied in Jesus' attitude. Nor is there any note of fear, as is the case with many people in confronting someone who is demented. The last character that you present in telling the story is the people in the synagogue. They can be even more enthusiastic than I told it if you want. They are

simply both delighted and amazed at what Jesus has done. Their words can have the spirit of things going around through the synagogue. You may be able to make them sound and act like the people in your community.

This is a joyful story of a great victory. Notice that what the people are saying at the end of the story is essentially a summary of the story itself. Thus, the story begins with Jesus teaching. Then the people are astonished at his teaching because he taught as one who had authority and then he commands the unclean spirits and they obey him. It's a summary of what has gone before.

While not directly stated, the implication is that Jesus is teaching about the kingdom of God. The implicit reference is back to the summary of Jesus' proclamation when He came into Galilee, an episode that Mark's audience had just heard two minutes ago. Thus, he was teaching that the time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God is near at hand, to repent and believe in the good news. The audience infers the content of Jesus' teaching from the earlier things that Jesus has said. You might want to remind your audience of Jesus' earlier teaching. This story is a confirmation that Jesus' announcement is true and that a new time is at hand in the battle with the powers of evil.