

# The First Sermon

## Mark 1:21-28

*Telling the truth can get you in trouble.*

A sermon preached by  
Rev. Dr. William O. (Bud) Reeves  
First United Methodist Church  
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My first sermons were preached almost half a century ago, and I still remember the occasions. They were memorable to me, if not to those who heard me preach them. I recently ran across one of those first sermons while I was doing research. I had a moment of deep repentance for inflicting that sermon on an unsuspecting congregation.

However, people were gracious and supportive and encouraged me to keep trying. One of the first sermons was at my home church in Sheridan. When I stood up to preach, there were two ladies sitting together near the front of the sanctuary—my two high school English teachers. They were kind and did not correct my grammar in the sermon. I also preached for my college friends in a chapel service at Hendrix College. It was a repeat of a sermon I had written to preach as a summer intern at First United Methodist Church in Stuttgart. It featured the longest acronym in the history of Christian preaching (as far as I know).

I have seldom been interrupted while preaching a sermon. In Hot Springs it happened three times; two were medical emergencies, and one mentally disturbed parishioner entered the service mid-sermon and asked to take over the preaching. (He didn't.)

The only hostile interruption happened in my very first appointment. It was the largest Methodist church in Houston—Houston, Arkansas—six people in the congregation. The treasurer had decided to withhold some of the money that was supposed to be sent in to the conference for connectional ministries, as a protest of some sort. I, being 24 years old, wet behind the ears, and a seminary student, decided this was a teachable moment, the perfect opportunity to give a sermon on the meaning and importance of the United Methodist connection. (You can see where this is going, right?)

In the middle of the sermon, the treasurer stood up and said angrily, “Brother Bud, I don't believe we deserve to be chastised like this!” I responded that I was not chastising, I was teaching. I continued the sermon, and the treasurer made a running commentary to her husband and four friends in the pews.

To make matters worse, it was Communion Sunday, and when I gave the invitation to the table, only one person, in addition to my wife, came forward for Communion. Our

footsteps echoed in the silent church as we walked out, deeply questioning my call to ministry. After 44 years, I have not forgotten that feeling.

So I sympathize with Jesus getting interrupted during his first sermon in Capernaum. As usual, Mark doesn't give us many details. I think we can assume that the point of Jesus' sermon in Capernaum was what Mark had already identified as the gospel Jesus preached: "*The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.*"<sup>1</sup>

Jesus was just getting wound up, and the congregation was "astounded," Mark says, at the authority Jesus had. It was not like the prepared statements of the Jewish rabbis. It was from the heart. Suddenly a man with an unclean spirit jumped up and interrupted the lesson. "*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.*"<sup>2</sup> Isn't it ironic that the religious people of Capernaum, and even the disciples of Jesus, took a while to figure out who Jesus was, but the demon-possessed man recognized him right away?

To the hearers in the synagogue, it was not unusual to encounter someone with an unclean spirit. Their worldview in that time was that the devil and his demons populated the world and existed in daily life. Demons caused bad stuff to happen, like diseases, disabilities, and mental illness. Casting out the demon was just part of the healing process.

This is not generally our modern understanding. We understand so much more about the causes of disease—heredity, germs, environmental factors. And mental illness causes people to act in dramatic and destructive ways. Still, reputable doctors and psychiatrists write books about the evil forces in the world that cannot be explained by rational and natural causes.<sup>3</sup> There is a growing belief in the supernatural evil evident in the world. Just look around. And the Roman Catholic Church reports that the classes to train exorcists are full to overflowing.<sup>4</sup>

What do we make of this? William Barclay gives us three options. We can believe that the demonology of the New Testament is still the reality in the world, or we can dismiss it as primitive thought. Or we can understand that Jesus lived in a time when people believed in demons. His mission was not to give people a crash course in modern psychology. He came to help people. And to heal the man with the unclean spirit, who believed he was possessed by a demon, Jesus had to assume the reality of his condition.<sup>5</sup>

Jesus spoke to the demon, "*Be quiet, and come out of him!*"<sup>6</sup> The translation is a little more polite than what the original language intends. The Greek word is a little more coarse, like Jesus said, "Shut up!" The evil spirit convulsed the man, and with a cry, it came out. The good Jews in the synagogue were now not only amazed at the words of Jesus, but also at his deeds of power: "*What is this? A new teaching—with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him.*"<sup>7</sup> So from the first sermon in Capernaum, the fame of Jesus began to spread throughout Galilee.

The point of this story is not the reality of the demon world. The real issue is not the exorcism in the synagogue, but the authority of Jesus and the astonishment of the people who saw and heard what he could do. New Testament scholar Lamar Williamson writes, "In both its parts, then, the text affirms the amazing authority of Jesus. This authority is evidenced through teaching which shows up the aridity of the authorized biblical interpreters of the day and through a special kind of healing which demonstrates Jesus' power over spiritual forces hostile to God."<sup>8</sup>

Fine. So what does this mean for us today? I think this Scripture gives us resources for dealing with opposition, both personal opposition and opposition to God. Maybe you don't think much about the devil and his demons; I don't, either. But apart from actual demons, there are plenty of unclean spirits all around us each and every day of our lives. Some of these evil spirits are internal—guilt and shame that keep us from embracing life, that inner voice that keeps telling us that we're not good enough, no matter what we do, addictions that possess our lives and prevent our happiness. Sometimes the most destructive force in our lives is self-destruction.

Other evil forces in the world are external: hunger, poverty, prejudice, injustice that never gives people a chance, politics that is mean, religion that is hateful, people who want to pick a fight just because they disagree with us. How do we deal with all the bad stuff in the world? How do we counter the opposition of evil?

First, you have to know your truth. Claim the ultimate reality of God as your foundation in life. Jesus has authority in heaven, on earth, and under the earth, Paul says. Claim his authority. Believe in Jesus. Learn his teaching. Follow his way; it is the way, the truth, and the life. Build your life on the solid foundation of Scripture. All this will give you a shield against every evil, a fortress against the destructive forces in life. You will be grounded in God.

Once you claim your truth, don't give in. Don't cave to the temptations and lures of the world. Evil forces and unhealthy attitudes can lead you astray. Don't go there. Understand the truth, and don't back down, unless, of course, you need to. Stand strong in your convictions, but be humble enough to know that you could be wrong. You might learn a better or different way, and it makes even more sense. You can change directions; I certainly have many times. Having the courage of your convictions does not mean that you are not open to new truth. It does mean you don't go down a destructive path.

Similar to this thought is to approach opposition with respect. Maybe someone disagrees with you or opposes you for some reason. Respond with humility, grace and civility. That doesn't mean to give in, but it does mean to treat your opposition with respect.

This is a huge problem in our culture today. If you disagree with someone, you can't be their friend any more. You can't have a civil conversation (which might bring about change). Everyone has to be divided into opposing camps. We get polarized at the far ends of the spectrum. Then we can demonize our opponents because we don't really know them. That's how so-called "cancel culture" works. If someone is in opposition to you, you do everything you can to destroy them. You've heard people say, "They're dead to me." If someone is dead to you, there is no chance to build a relationship, learn from each other, and perhaps come to a mutual understanding or reconciliation.

One of John Wesley's most famous phrases came out of a long disagreement with his friend George Whitfield. Whitfield and Wesley were both doing amazing work for the Lord in England, but they had a long-running theological argument. If you must know, Whitfield was a Calvinist, and Wesley was an Arminian—something few people understand and even fewer would get in a fight about. John and George did not change their minds, but they remained friends, and when George Whitfield died, John Wesley preached his funeral. Instead of using the opportunity to make a final argument that his friend could not answer, Wesley extolled the virtues and the faith of Whitfield, and when it came to their differences of opinion, he said, "In these we may think and let think; we

may ‘agree to disagree.’”<sup>9</sup> Agreeing to disagree doesn’t cancel a relationship. It leaves space for conversation and growth.

Following the example of Jesus, when we encounter evil or opposition, we claim our truth; we don’t back down, unless we should; and we respect the opposition. And finally, be amazing. Jesus was amazing. He astounded his hearers with his words and his deeds. We can’t be that amazing. But we can live amazing lives that overcome any opposition or evil that comes our way.

The first step toward being amazing is to be amazed. Look at Jesus! He is so awesome. Remember what he said and did. Realize that he is alive and in us through the Holy Spirit. Consider the majesty of God, who made this entire complicated universe. It’s amazing! Think of the love and grace and peace and joy God gives us. We should be astounded!

Astounded and astonished by the awesomeness of God, we can live amazing lives, full of the gifts God brings us in Jesus. We just live lives so transparently in love with Jesus that no opposition can touch us; no evil can destroy us. St. John Chrysostom was an early Church Father in the 4<sup>th</sup> century, the archbishop of Constantinople. Christianity had only recently been recognized in the Roman Empire, and there was still a great deal of opposition to the faith. Chrysostom’s encouragement to his people was, “Let us astound them by our way of life. This is the unanswerable argument. Though we give 10,000 precepts in words, if we do not exhibit a far better life, we gain nothing. Let us win them by our life.”<sup>10</sup> This reminds me of something Jesus said, “*Let your light so shine before others that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.*”<sup>11</sup>

Martin Luther King, Jr., encountered the evil of racism and opposition on every front. His home was bombed; he was beaten and jailed; he was illegally wire-tapped; he was threatened with death, until he was shot. King’s primary strategies always came from Jesus, but he also found a helpful analogy in Greek mythology, which he shared in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech in 1964:

There is a fascinating little story that is preserved for us in Greek literature about Ulysses and the Sirens. The Sirens had the ability to sing so sweetly that sailors could not resist steering toward their island. Many ships were lured upon the rocks, and men forgot home, duty, and honor as they flung themselves into the sea to be embraced by arms that drew them down to death. Ulysses, determined not to be lured by the Sirens, first decided to tie himself tightly to the mast of his boat, and his crew stuffed their ears with wax. But finally he and his crew learned a better way to save themselves: they took on board the beautiful singer Orpheus whose melodies were sweeter than the music of the Sirens. When Orpheus sang, who bothered to listen to the Sirens?<sup>12</sup>

That’s not exactly the story of Ulysses and Orpheus, but King made his point. When we encounter evil and opposition in the world, we can try to strap ourselves to the hard mast of dogma, or we can stuff our ears with stale religion. But it’s better to listen to the sweeter song. Sing the song of Jesus, and the sirens of the world’s chaos will lose their attraction for you. Sing the song of God’s love and grace, and evil will have no power over your life. Claim the authority of Jesus; don’t back down; treat everyone with respect and love, and you will be amazed. You will be amazing! And the world will be astounded.

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<sup>1</sup> Mark 1:15.

<sup>2</sup> Mark 1:24.

<sup>3</sup> E.g., Paul Tournier, M. Scott Peck. See William Barclay, *The Gospel of Mark, Revised Edition* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1975), 35f.

<sup>4</sup> Jackson Sinnenberg, “As exorcism demand continues to rise, Vatican to hold training,” *The National Desk*, February 27<sup>th</sup>, 2023. <https://thenationaldesk.com/news/americas-news-now/vatican-to-hold-training-next-month-as-demand-for-exorcism-continues-to-rise>.

<sup>5</sup> Barclay, p. 36.

<sup>6</sup> Mark 1:25.

<sup>7</sup> Mark 1:27.

<sup>8</sup> Lamar Williamson, Jr., *Mark* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1983), 51f.

<sup>9</sup> <https://essential40.com/the-silent-war/tsw-whitefield.html>.

<sup>10</sup> James Howell, “What can we say January 28?,” *Weekly Preaching Notions*, January 1, 2024.

<https://jameshowellsweeklypreachingnotions.blogspot.com/>

<sup>11</sup> Matthew 5:16.

<sup>12</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr. “Nobel Prize lecture.”

<https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/peace/1964/king/lecture/>.