

## The Shape of Authority (Mark 1:21-28)

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Herod built a mountain. He built a mountain. Talk about doing hard things. How do you just go and build a mountain? That is a hard, amazing thing. Herod was truly impressive. His drive to accomplish great things seemed unconstrained. In fact, many of our great leaders today in politics and business and technology might cower before the power and authority of Herod.

This is all the more amazing because Herod was not Roman, he was the king of Judea: a little kingdom on the far side of the empire. This tiny kingdom in the middle of a desert did not hold Herod back. He knew how to work the system, how to gain power, how to exert authority. He came to power with the help of Mark Anthony but when he saw the political winds shifting, he gave his allegiance to Octavian, Caesar Augustus. His political maneuvering left him with a great deal of freedom to run his kingdom as he saw fit.

What did he do? He built a harbor at Caesarea with a palace overlooking the sea. This harbor fast became the largest town in Judea. He built entirely new cities, he rebuilt entire sections of Jerusalem. He expanded the Temple Mountain and completely rebuilt the Temple. This was one of the largest and most impressive building projects in the world at the time. Herod built roads, palaces, aqueducts, fountains, shrines and even a mountain.

The mountain, Herodium, was a mountain fortress that sat 400 ft above sea level and had an outer diameter of 200 ft. There were seven stories in the cylinder-shaped construction. It contained private apartments for the royal family. The floors were covered with beautiful tiles, mosaics with stunning outdoor scenes covered the walls. There was an amphitheater with an orchestra pit. A palace garden. A bathhouse with an advanced heating system. A swimming pool. It even had a burial area for Herod's body when he died.

Herod also killed his brother-in-law, strangled his wife, killed her parents, executed two of his sons, slaughtered innocents babies after Jesus was born and even issued an order to kill a group of distinguished men at his death, so the people would mourn. This last command was not carried out. For Herod, authority looks like raw power, political power, and ruthless elimination of the competition (even if that includes his family).

Herod died a few months after Jesus was born. The world where Jesus lived and walked was largely shaped and influenced by Herod the Great. So it might be interesting to contrast the rule and authority of Jesus with Herod.<sup>1</sup> When Jesus began

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<sup>1</sup> For an extended study on the leadership style of Jesus and Herod (as well as other leaders of the day) see "The Jesus Way" by Eugene Peterson, Eerdmans, 2007.

his ministry, he called a few disciples to follow him. he had no political allies in Judea or Rome. He started his ministry in Capernaum, a little seaside village in Galilee. If he had a business coach, he might have been challenged Jesus to launch his “Kingdom of God” model in a larger, more influential city where he could penetrate the social networks and really make an impact. Instead, Jesus was content to ignore the halls of power and the people of power and simply address a few folks in the synagogue at Capernaum.

Mark writes,

Then they went into Capernaum, and immediately on the Sabbath He entered the synagogue and taught. <sup>22</sup> And they were astonished at His teaching, for He taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes. (NKJV; Mark 1:21-22)

In the middle of nowhere, the Son of God, the Word Made Flesh speaks. And when he speaks, he speaks as one having authority.

As we think about changing our world, reaching our culture, making an impact, we are faced with this crisis of authority. Every power is suspect. Authority is seen as oppressive, deceptive, controlling. We want freedom to negotiate, freedom from authority, freedom to live however we want. Into this setting, in this moment of time, the Gospel speaks and living and full of life and power.

Jesus speaks as one having authority. This looks nothing like the politics of Herod. Jesus builds no buildings. Jesus rules no governments. He lives outside of the centers of power. And yet, we gather here today because He continues to speak in His Word as one having authority. By pausing briefly over His authority we see revealed in the Gospels, we might distinguish some ways the distinct authority of Jesus continues to shape His people and unfold His kingdom.

The Gospel of Mark begins with John the Baptist pointing to Jesus as the One who will baptize with the Holy Spirit. We hear the Father’s blessing upon Jesus when he is baptized, “You are my Beloved Son in whom I am well pleased.” We watch Jesus pass through a time a testing in the wilderness. Then Jesus announces, “The Kingdom of God is at hand.”

As Jack shared with us last week, Jesus interrupts the lives of the Simon and Andrew and calls them to follow him into a great adventure. In today’s reading, He enters the synagogue and teaches as One having authority. He rebukes an unclean spirit and commands it to come out. Then he goes out and heals Peter’s mother-in-law and many other people. He rises early in the morning to go and pray, and finally he goes to the next town to preach the good news of the kingdom.

What kind of authority do we see revealed? I would suggest that this is a fully embodied authority: we see the Word of the Kingdom embodied in the person of Jesus Christ. Even as He declares the Kingdom of God is at hand, He incarnates this very word in His

victory of temptation, His call of the disciples, His teaching, His deliverance from the evil spirits, His healing of the sick and His affirmation by the Father in heaven.

He is revealing the absolute authority of His Father. He is revealing the authority of the Creator of Heaven and Earth. This authority is revealed in word and action. What a contrast with Herod. Herod is grasping for authority. His power is fueled by human blood. He has to kill all who threaten his power because he does not actually hold any power. He is constantly trying to get and keep a power, an authority that he cannot ultimately retain. When he dies any power that he did have, dies with him.

When Jesus commissions His disciples and ascends beyond our view, His authority continues to be revealed in Peter, James, John and others. We see and hear the Good News of the kingdom spread through Jerusalem and through the empire. The very witness of Jesus is revealed in the words and lives of His disciples. They become living witnesses to His rule and authority in every age. When they die, the Word of Christ continues to resound from generation to generation. When we proclaim the Good News revealed in and through Jesus Christ, His authority continues to call, deliver, heal and restore people.

When Jesus first calls the disciples, he gives them power. Mark 6 says that "He called the twelve to *Himself*, and began to send them out two *by two*, and gave them power over unclean spirits" (6:27). They exhibited real power to cast out demons and heal the sick.

This kind of authority might be called a power to enforce. The police officer carries a badge as a sign of authority. He has a power to enforce the laws and can even resort to the added power of a weapon if needed.

There are times when a parent uses this kind of authority to protect a child from harm. The parent has the actual physical power to stop a child. A child takes off running in the parking lot. The mother raises her voice and physically grabs the child to protect him. While parents may have to use physical force to protect their children, their primary authority will be exerted through inspiration to obey.

Physical force will only last so long. There are times when it can be abusive and actually work against authority. Especially as the child grows up. Some children may run away from abusive homes. Some may stay at home but run away inwardly. The true parent is training the child with tools to live and calling the child into a life of fullness.

Jesus reveals a power to enforce, but he also reveals an authority to inspire. The word authority comes from same root as the word author, meaning creator, originator.<sup>2</sup> This ancient word conveys the sense of nourishing, increase, or one who gives increase.

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<sup>2</sup> "According to French linguist Emile Benveniste, auctor (which also gives us English "author") is derived from Latin augeō ("to augment"). The auctor is "is qui auget", the one who augments the act or the juridical situation of another. Auctor in the sense of "author", comes from auctor as founder or, one might say, "planter-cultivator"." (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Auctoritas>)

This form of authority is so very different than the authority of Herod and the authority we see often demonstrated in the world around us. This is life-giving power. Think of watering a plant and helping it grow into fullness.

At the beginning of their call, the disciples are given authority over demons, but Jesus has authority to nourish, strengthen and shape their very lives into living reflections of His life and love.

The authority of Jesus is the authority of the author, the originator, the creator. Who calls us into fullness, into a life of true flourishing. Listen to the Scottish Theologian P. T. Forsyth as he reflects upon the authority of Jesus,

"The whole nature of authority is changed as soon as it ceases to be statutory and becomes thus personal and religious. It is no longer then what it is to most people—a limit; it becomes a source of power. It is not, in the first instance, regulative and depressive; it is expansive, it is creative. Like personality, it is not a delimiting circle, but an exuberant source. It makes the soul to be more than in its egoism it could ever be. It means increase, augmentation (*auctoritas*). By the true obedience we are more. It is the great culture, the great enrichment. Our great authority is what gives us most power to go forward; it is not what ties us up most to a formal past. It is of Grace and not of law. It cannot be a doctrine, nor a book, nor an institution; it must, for a person, be a person. And a person who is not an æsthetic ideal of perfection, but an active source of life, a person who is gathered up and consummated in a creative, redemptive act. There is no revolt when the authority is realised as the Lord and Giver of Life; for it is the passion for life and its largeness that is at the root of rebellion."<sup>3</sup>

This authority is rooted in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. In obedience to the Father, He enters into the brokenness of our human lives. All of us are broken. Just as we see him healing people and casting out demons, we are seeing how he comes into our own lives of brokenness and oppression. He speaks as One having authority, as having real power to lead us into the freedom of true human flourishing and fullness.

When He calls the disciples, He calls them to follow Him. They follow into the story of the kingdom of God. They follow Him into the lives of people who are hurting and broken and in need of God's grace. And eventually they follow Him into the way of the cross, which becomes not a way of limitation, but a way of fullness, a way of hope, a way of joy.

Jesus has called us into this way. He is making us living witnesses. At the end of Matthew, he calls out to the disciples and to us,

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<sup>3</sup> Forsyth, P. T. *The Principle of Authority in Relation to Certainty, Sanctity and Society: An Essay in the Philosophy of Experimental Religion*. New York; London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1912, p. 14.

<sup>18</sup> And Jesus came and spoke to them, saying, “All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. <sup>19</sup> Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, <sup>20</sup> teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, *even to the end of the age.*” Amen. (NKJV; Matthew 28:18-20)

We live and serve in His authority. The world around us is cautious and questioning of authority. It equates all authority with the abusive, power-grabbing authority of Herod. Sadly, people who try to escape this kind of authority often submit to it under another form or name.

We live in a land of freedom but how many become enslaved to careers that drain the very life of the soul? How many become enslaved to habits that crush the heart and deplete our capacity to love? How many enter into numbing relationships or controlling relationships without the hope of finding love? We may speak of a culture that distrusts all forms of authority, but I would suggest people are continually submitting themselves to powers greater than themselves: the power of trends, wealth, lusts, addictions and more. These powers crush, enslave and steal the very joy of life.

Jesus has come that we might have life and have it abundantly. The authority he exerts is the authority of our Creator, our Father in Heaven, our Kinsman-Redeemer who has come to lead us into fullness of love and joy. As we address the people around us in the workplace, in the school, in the marketplace, some will mock and turn away, but some people will hear us. Their hearts will burn within them as they hear the call of Christ.

These opportunities to speak, to witness to love of Christ may come unexpectedly in the middle of a conversation. As I sat in the coffee shop, I overheard a couple businessmen speak this week. In the space of fifteen minutes, they talked about an upcoming business deal, the controversy of the under inflated footballs, new technology and then suddenly they talked about the place of God in our science saturated world.

I would suggest that many people around us already feel the longing for God even when they do not express it and even seem turned against it. The Lord can invite us into a dialogue with someone over lunch, at the water cooler, in an email exchange. It might be a short exchange and we might only say a word or two. It might be an opportunity to offer prayer, and then it might be an opportunity to step into a deeper relation.

When Christ calls us, He gives us authority as His people to reveal His life. Just as the early disciples prayed for people and cast out demons, the church, the people of God continue to pray for healing and continue to pray against the evil One. His authority is also one of nourishing and growth. He is shaping us even as He is shaping others through us. By His Spirit, Jesus Christ is making us Living Witnesses in word and deed. We continue to ask God to make us witnesses. We open our hearts to his guidance and prompting. We trust that even as He revealed the kingdom of God in the middle of a nowhere seaside village in Galilee, he can reveal His life and love and kingdom through us. So we are hopeful that he can and will call those around us to himself, to his life, to

a life of true human flourishing, to the way of the cross that leads to life and love unending.

Karl Ratzinger believes that the church has entered a time of poverty and meekness that will be hard and wearisome at times. He suggests that our despising culture might serve to renew our trust in God alone. This culture of disbelief cannot sustain a people. He writes, “For the inhabitants of a totally planned world will be unutterably lonely. If God has completely disappeared from them, they will realize the extent of their terrible poverty. Then they will discover the small community of believers as something entirely new—as a hope that is meant for them, as an answer they have always sought in secret.”<sup>4</sup>

Even now, let us turn author and finisher of our faith, trusting that He will prepare us to speak, to bear witness to His hope, His kingdom and His life in the hour of His choosing.

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<sup>4</sup> Ratzinger, Joseph. *Co-Workers of the Truth: Meditations for Every Day of the Year*. Edited by Irene Grassl. Translated by Mary Frances McCarthy and Lothar Krauth. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1992, p. 33.