

Authority for New Times

1 Samuel 8: 4-20 Mark 3: 20-35

As I've been discussing in the weeks after Easter, the beginning church, or more accurately, the ongoing movement of Jesus followers faced a wide open future. They didn't have much for instructions on what to do. Jesus' basic message for them was to follow his path and do what he had been doing. That is barely a vision statement much less an organizational strategy. There were no written gospel accounts to consult. Forget about Paul's counsel in his letters; he was soon to become the Jesus peoples' worst enemy before his miraculous conversion – so no help there.

In fact, as we've seen in prior weeks, the Jesus people fumbled around simply figuring out how to name a twelfth apostle. Even after Pentecost, it isn't like the Holy Spirit helped them to decide a whole lot. They remained a Jewish reform movement, still attending services in the Temple and presumably engaging other Jews about the Messiah who had come, was crucified, and risen from the dead. It could also be surmised that they remained rather cautious and tried to stay under the radar out of the attention of the ruling Jewish leadership.

While various factors would change, with external official sanction flowing positively for a period, and then switching to ebb negatively, internal issues were also troublesome. The Twelve in Jerusalem formed the basic authority, but even they weren't all on the same page. Paul's angry Galatians letter shows how the factions were playing games. Once the Twelve were gone in the later years of the 1st century, and the Jewish element of the Christians' tradition and practice was no longer as relevant, there would be a contest of different voices. By the later part of the 1st century and more in the 2nd century, the gospels and letters that would form the New Testament became more commonly known. However, there were plenty of other writings that were quite dubious in value and viewpoint that also claimed some authority in particular locales.

These different voices would typically come from respected leaders in major urban centers like Alexandria, Rome, Antioch, to name a few. These would become known as bishops. (The notion that Peter was the first bishop of Rome is an anachronism; no one was referred to as a bishop until well into the 2nd century – just don't tell the Vatican, or your Catholic friends.) They seemed to know a heresy when they heard one, and then argue for what should be believed instead. That didn't mean that these *de facto* leaders called the shots entirely; some of those heresies had legs and were still causing divisions when the Councils began meeting the 4th century.

All of this is to say that authority is a way of finding hairy beasts, as in plenty of challengers. Authority is the question posed in our scriptures this morning: Who gets to have authority? This gets thorny on issues regarding spiritual and sacred matters, particularly when the ways of the world come in conflict with the sacred.

In the reading from 1st Samuel, ch. 8 notes how Samuel, the judge/leader of Israel, had grown old. Having handed off judging/leadership responsibilities to his two

sons, the people of Israel soon realized that these sons were total dipsticks, taking bribes and providing corruption instead of justice. (The two judges before Samuel, Eli and Gideon, *also* had sons who were scheming sleaze balls. Apparently those called as judges were **lousy** as fathers.) Samuel's awful sons become the *pretext* for a delegation of elders to pay Samuel a visit and demand a change.

Samuel's sons *really* are no more than a pretext for the elders' visit. We know because the elders don't ask Samuel to remove his sons from their responsibilities. They don't ask for new worthy judges to be appointed. They demand: *Appoint a king to lead us*, and for what reason: ... *such as all the other nations have*.

Is there an urgent reason to make this request at this particular time? Are there armies massing at the border? Have they suffered losses in battle? Are other nations reneging on treaties? "No" to all of those. The 12 tribes have established peace through battlefield victories, and successfully negotiated settlements with multiple nation-states. Everything seems to be about as good as it's going to get. Yet the elders are unhappy with all of this good news. They want a change at the top, and they demand that Samuel make it happen.

Samuel is not at all pleased. He's taking it a bit personally. But as Samuel prays about this, God changes Samuel's heart and helps Samuel to see that this is their rejection of **God**, not Samuel.

Samuel goes back and tells the elders what they'll be getting; their children serving (and dying) in the military, fighting the battles of the king. This king will make significant demands on their lives from top to bottom, requiring their acceptance of the king's own private agenda and supporting this king's wealth with their own resources. Samuel makes it clear that when God is in charge, God seeks a faithful, obedient people who get blessed by God on the battlefield, in the marketplace, in their homes and businesses, in their community and tribe. God's demand for faithfulness seems like a far better value in this deal. But the elders won't hear of it.

This move will divide attentions as authority over their lives transfers from the sacred to the worldly, compromising the historic sacred purpose and covenant with God by introducing the new worldly purpose and implied covenant of a monarchy. The division will create major problems that many would see as outweighing the beneficial aspects of secular government. But this also makes God's authority secondary, no matter what may be said to justify the move. The elders see new times before them, and they want to be just like the other states in the world around them. The politics and kingdom of the nation-state never finds itself fulfilling the Kingdom of God.

We have a different situation in this early reading from Mark's gospel where Jesus has already gained a huge following for his ministry that has been healing and driving out demons who cry out their affirmations, "You are the Son of God." Thanks, demons! Apart from the demons, his ministry has attracted the attention of **others** as well.

First, word has gotten back to his mother and family that he is casting out demons, performing miracles, and leading a movement. They've rushed off to get him and bring him home where hopefully he'll get these wacky ideas out of his head. He is drawing unwanted attention to himself, and therefore to them, too. They don't want to be implicated in his movement, or get swept up in any persecution that is sure to come.

But too late! Speaking of 'demons,' the teachers of the Law have already come from Jerusalem, and they claim that [Jesus] *is possessed by Beelzebul! By the prince of demons, he is driving out demons!* Now you can see why the family is troubled. If the accusation is troubling, look who is saying it – Jerusalem scribes. Uh-oh.

These scribes didn't just happen by on their way through town. They came **out** from Jerusalem specifically to find Jesus, having heard about his healings and blessings happening out in the countryside. They want it shut down, period. They start by trying to discredit Jesus and whatever authority he might be claiming, seeking to assert their own authority.

Jesus doesn't call these Jewish leaders twits explicitly, but he may as well have. *How can Satan cast out Satan? If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. And if a house is divided against itself, that house will not be able to stand. And if Satan has risen up against himself and is divided, he cannot stand, but his end **has** come.* You jerks.

Jesus doesn't defend his actions. Jesus doesn't try to explain what he is doing. Jesus doesn't describe how he is able to compel the demons. Jesus skips all of that and goes directly to the substance of their claim and shreds it completely, rendering it a steaming pile of cattle poo. That's how you do it!

Then Jesus launches a mini-parable: in order to steal the possessions of the strong man, you must first bind him. Well, what is this about? The simple corollary is that the prince of demons is the strong man, and in order to take what is his, he'd need to be bound and contained. That would make Jesus a stronger man, or at least a smarter man. The basic point is that it takes the prince of righteousness and his sacred strength to bind the worldly-strong prince of demons. No one but the one sent from God could do that, so ... BOOM! Chew on that, you stupid scribes! Who has authority here *now*?

Let's also realize that these demons are not some mysteriously violent evildoers like some B grade horror movie. We don't usually know what these demons are exactly, but they have a social ordering function. "The demons" can refer to how the normal, well-behaved people get separated from the ones who are behaving badly, who are possessed by demons. People who denounced the system and repeatedly challenged authority were not regarded as having sound mind, body, or spirit, and seen as not "normal," i.e. possessed by spirits, and cast out. Loud mouths challenging authority were going to die if they didn't shut up. All of which explains why the scribes resorted to calling Jesus the right arm of the "prince of demons." Thus, Jesus equals demonic.

On the other hand, you remember the “demons” in the pews at the synagogue in Mark 2, the ones who had their reserved seat in church, who shrieked when Jesus taught, likely about love, compassion, justice, unity, and other things that make some people shriek with horror. Which demons are we talking about here? I can’t honestly tell you.

Jesus’ family is coming to get him because they fear that he has lost his mind. While Jesus is causing trouble for himself, they can see how it could go badly for them, too. They’ve seen whole families get wiped out because one big-mouthed rebel thinks he’s going to change things.

Jesus’ family arrives and Jesus gets notified. Again, Jesus doesn’t defend his statements, doesn’t explain who he is, and doesn’t attack his family. He simply redefines what constitutes his family. It’s a hugely important institution, so his words are not to be taken lightly. He extends the circle of family in terms of Kingdom faithfulness; *Whoever does God’s will [like I am] is my brother and sister and mother.* It’s a bit of a crazy statement to ancient ears, but it identifies him as “crazy” as far as society and the social order are concerned; it also identifies faithful servants of God as his kin. If that’s “crazy,” so be it. Crazy or not, it is the kind of thing that makes demons shriek.

Jesus lives and ministers amid a house divided. As the changing times announced in Jesus’ good news seeks to overturn the tables of power and authority, those in power and authority are ready with determined resistance, determined to keep power and keep things the way they like them.

Jesus doesn’t engage those who would divide him from his mission on *their* terms. He stands in his sacred mission and his spiritual calling to **re**-define what was set before him. The ways of the world were naturally going to challenge his words and actions, but he refused to let them define him or his ministry. He saw their attempt to pull him into their worldview, but he reached instead for his strength in sacred power and authority.

As in Samuel’s time, and in Jesus’ time, God is seeking to make new times happen. These would truly be new times, the age of the Kingdom of God when the wealthy and ruling powers of the world find themselves out of a job, out of cash, and running for their lives – tables turned! When the world proclaims new times, what it really means is that it’s just like the old times, but with a few “new” features – “new” in quotes since that’s sarcasm. There isn’t anything truly new that the world is doing because the same kinds of people are doing the same kinds of things. New times come from God, from an in-breaking of the sacred and spiritual taking over authority and power from the worldly authorized.

You’ll know when it happens, too. The demons will start shrieking.