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B: Epiphany 4
Mark 1:21–28

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“Astounded and Amazed”

Mark, the earliest of our gospel writers, couldn't wait to tell the story of Jesus.

No forward, or preface, or introduction. He just dives in.

Just 18 sentences into the book and there's been

no mention of a virgin birth with star and magi and angel chorus,

no mention of prophecies being fulfilled,

no mention of any previous teachings or miracles,

and yet Mark tells us that ²²*They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority....*

And then Jesus casts a demon out of a man and Mark says, ²⁷*They were all amazed!*"

All we know about Jesus up to this point in the gospel are three things:

- that while he was being baptized he had come to trust in God's amazing love,

- that he had then spent a long time alone in the desert wrestling with demons,

- and that then he had set out on a mission to proclaim

that God who is in complete charge of the universe has this amazing love for us,

that we can experience God's love and power right here and right now, and

that we should trust in that good news and let it transform our lives.

That's it.

And ²²*They were astounded at his teaching...*"

They were astounded, because *“he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes.”*

The scribes were men who studied scripture, and traditions around scripture.

They studied the different interpretations of scripture

and spent a lot of time discussing and debating what God's Word really meant.

And they would share their varied opinions with the people, citing this tradition or quoting that rabbi,

and these references would give their words credibility, authority.

But Jesus had an entirely different style.

He taught the people with no appeal to outside authority.

He wasn't quoting other people or passing along what others had said.

He wasn't leading a discussion or moderating a debate.

He was speaking out of his own experience, from an authority that came solely from within himself.

People have often speculated about the “lost years of Jesus” –

about what he was doing for 30 years before he began his ministry.

There are all kinds of legends about him.

Some have him studying with great spiritual teachers all around the world.

Others have him working as a carpenter in the family business, or leaving carpentry to work as a fisherman

Others have him studying with local rabbis.

But according to Mark, there are only 3 things that we need to know about Jesus,

that at his baptism he had come to know God's infinite love for him,

that he had spent a long time confronting his own demons,

and that he had come out of that experience eager to share the amazing news

of what it means when we let God be God.

Now I want you to notice the order here.

Jesus didn't struggle with demons first, then come to know God's love, and want to tell everyone about it.

He came to know God's love first – and then came the demons.

For me, that's an important thing to understand.
 Too many times, when things fall apart in our lives –
 when our bodies succumb to illness or pain,
 when our relationships crumble,
 when our ability to provide for ourselves and our families is threatened,
 when the hot water tank fails and the car breaks down and the temp job falls through – all on the same day –
 we may wonder where God is,
 and why - if God really and truly loves us like we've been told – God isn't doing anything to help.

I imagine that there must have been times in the desert when Jesus was struggling with his demons
 that he had his doubts.

If he were God's beloved child, and if God was pleased with him,
 then why had all these temptations and struggles come into his life?

But somehow, some way, he managed to hold onto his faith in God and in God's love for him,
 and God brought him through this demon filled time.

And then, at his very first preaching gig, there's a man with a demon!

And Jesus, having had his own experiences with the devil, is able to heal the man.

(At that point, I imagine Jesus saying, "OK, God, now I get why I had to go through that!")

From his experience of God's love at his baptism had come his authority to teach.

From his experience of God's power in the wilderness had come his authority to heal.

And here's the kicker: Jesus didn't keep that authority for himself.

Just a little bit later in Mark, Jesus appoints the twelve to teach and to heal

And after his resurrection he commissions his disciples – then and now – to go into all the world
 and *proclaim the good news...cast out demons, heal the sick, and perform miracles.*

Now you may be thinking, "I don't have that kind of power. I can't do those things." but Jesus shows us how.

All it took for Jesus to teach and act with God's authority was

his trust in God's love for him,

his experience of God's grace as he dealt with his own demons,

and his eagerness to share what he had learned with others.

What Jesus experienced at his baptism was God's love and that was what empowered his words.

What he proclaimed is this:

You have been created by God in God's very image!

You are God's work of art – God's masterpiece!

You are God's beloved child! And God loves you just the way you are!

There is absolutely nothing you can do or say or think to make God love you more than God already does.

Believing in that, knowing that, trusting in that will empower every word that you say.

What Jesus experienced in the wilderness was God's power and that's what empowered his actions.

Most of you have had your own struggles in the desert.

God doesn't bring the challenges into your life – they are simply part of life in this world.

But God does promise to help you through those challenges –

and when you get through them you will be stronger like metal forged in fire

and that will empower every action you take.

God calls and gathers us in this place so that we can remind each other of God's love and power.

God meets us here to shape our minds, hearts, bodies, and spirits – to transform our very lives.

God graces us here with gifts of forgiveness and faith, peace and joy, light and life.

And God sends us out from here to share those gifts with everyone we meet.

Jesus' mission was to share – through word & deed – his absolute trust in God's power & love. Our mission is the same.

Trust in God's love and power, let it light up our lives,

so that we might light the way for others to God's love and power, too.

As you live out your faith, may your words of praise astound and may your deeds of service amaze –

in the name of Jesus, by the power of the Spirit, to the glory of God. **Amen**