



# Fourth Sunday after Epiphany

January 31, 2021

Prelude

## Gathering

Acolyte: Jesus Christ is the light of the world. We light this candle as a sign that Christ has come and Christ will come again. As the light pushes back darkness let us walk with, learn from, and worship Jesus Christ.

Liturgist: Praise the Lord! Extol the Lord with all your heart in the gathering of God's people.

**All: Great are the works of the Lord!  
They are pondered by all who delight in them.**

Liturgist: Glorious and majestic are his deeds and his righteousness endures forever.

**All: God causes us to remember his wonders; the Lord is gracious and  
compassionate.**

Liturgist: God provides food for those who fear him; He remembers his covenant forever.  
*Psalm 111:1-5 adapted*

**All Singing: 559 "Ten Thousand Reasons"**

God's Greeting  
Passing the Peace

## Reconciliation

Liturgist: God has shown his people the power of his works.



## **Dedication**

Welcoming New Members: Rodney & Jean Korthals

Prayers of the People

**All Singing: 956 “To God Be the Glory”**

Benediction

### **Worship Leaders**

Pianist / Vocalist:	Erin Pacheco
Flutist / Vocalist:	Sarah Rinkenberger
Drums:	Margot VanderWeele
Acolyte:	Tyler & Megan Hughes
Liturgist:	Anne VanderWeele
Violinist / Prayer:	David VanderWeele
Sound / Video:	Schuyler Roozeboom
Minister:	Roger Nelson

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Text: Mark 1: 21-28  
Title: Authentic Authority  
Date: 01.31.21  
Roger Allen Nelson

These have been a difficult couple weeks for our brothers and sisters at Roseland Christian Ministries.

Edgar Jackson, who lived with his mother in the shelter a few years ago, was shot and killed. The family, while now out of the shelter, are still part of the RCM community and we (Hope Church) helped with cremation costs and funeral expenses. Pastor Joe Huizenga gathered family and friends for the funeral service.

David Walker is the musician that leads us in song in our shared worship services. David's brother was shot and killed by his step-son. On Tuesday Joe and the RCM community held a funeral service and held this dear friend in this loss.

The one-month-old baby of Sabrina Beecham's grandniece was found dead in the bed she shared with her mom and two older siblings. Joe, Sabrina, and the RCM community stood with this shattered young mother in the funeral on Friday.

Marshawn, a college sophomore and an affable loquacious counselor at the RCM summer day camp, was killed in a car crash just a handful of blocks from the Center. That funeral was yesterday. Again, Joe and many from RCM were called to stand with the grieving family.

There's a great deal of sadness and brokenness in this world. If you're black and poor, life is particularly "brutish and short." May God strengthen and encourage Joe and the folks at RCM. And may the kingdom of God come quickly...

In the middle of all that, Joe called to talk about preaching at funerals. Every culture has different expectations and practices. To cross cultural bridges with sensitivity, compassion, and authenticity is no easy task. At one point, Joe said that in preaching he used to try to be "blackish" and then he swung in the other direction to something that was equally forced and ill fitting. The journey to finding his own voice, and then to trust that voice, is a long-slow-hard journey with lots of missteps. And it seems to me a journey that is never completed.

And yet, everything in us, no matter what the culture, longs for an authentic voice. We need the traditions and practices of faith, but we also long for whatever authority there is in an authentic human voice. Our text meets us at that intersection: Wherein lies the authority of Jesus?

We pick up where we left off...

Jesus has called a quartet of fishermen. "The Kingdom of God has come near. Repent, believe, follow." And, truth be told, when these first disciples dropped their nets to follow they were living into a common practice: itinerate rabbis regularly gathered students to listen and learn.

This was all very pedestrian.

But Mark takes this customary practice and immediately turns it on its head. The first story that Mark tells demonstrates that this is no ordinary rabbi and that following Jesus will lead to places that they've never imagined.

Jesus and his little band of disciples go to Capernaum where Jesus teaches in the synagogue on the Sabbath. But Mark doesn't offer word one of what Jesus taught. There's no mention of content, there's no summary of substance, and there's no memorable line. However, there is record of how people responded. The people thought that Jesus taught with "authority."

The Greek word here for authority has the sense of something that is internal, intrinsic, or of one's essence. In this context....

Authority is not something conferred.

Authority is not earned or seized.

Authority is not something that you can frame and put on the wall.

But authority is located in the very substance of the person.

*The people were astonished because he taught as one with authority.*

Now, maybe they were astonished in the same way that we remember great teachers for how they taught not for what they taught. Maybe you took a certain professor because the experience of learning was often more important than the content of the course....

Or, maybe the listeners that Sabbath morning simply heard Jesus speak the truth without a lot of religious posturing or wary waffling. He didn't need to impress with credentials or oratorical flourish; he didn't need to quote other sources or litter lines with alliteration. When he spoke, the truth was self-authenticating. Astonishing.

Or, maybe there's something more....

The story is told that when Pope John the XXIII met a group of Vatican visitors that included children, he asked one of the mothers, "Would you please tell me the names of your children. I realize that others in this room could tell me their names, but something very special happens when a mother speaks the names of her own children."

That's a lovely sentiment, the recognition of an unmistakable intimacy, and an authenticity that can't be faked or finagled. And maybe it's a glimpse into what the people heard when Jesus taught. Jesus didn't just teach about God but embodied God.

Jesus didn't teach about the Kingdom; the Kingdom was as near as he was.

Jesus didn't speculate about the will of God but incarnated the will of God.

Jesus didn't talk about love; Jesus was love.

So, when Jesus taught, there was something intimate or intrinsic to God that the listeners had not encountered before. That's the startling claim of the gospels. That's where the meat is cleaved from the bone.

And the demon in the crowd is the one who gets it. He bellows out:

*What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are – the Holy One of God!*

Dear friends, compressed into the first 24 verses of his gospel, Mark includes two proclamations about Jesus. The first when the sky is torn open and God announces,

*You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.*

And the second, the outburst from a demon,

*I know who you are – the Holy One of God.*

Those proclamations don't come from Jesus; they come from outside of Jesus. That pattern is true throughout much of Mark's gospel. From heaven and hell, from God and from demon, from the light and from the dark there is the proclamation that the authority of Jesus is intrinsic.

“This is the son of God,  
the embodiment of God,  
the will of God,  
the way of God,  
the love of God.”  
Thanks be to God.

Mark notes that when the people went home that day their astonishment was about the authority of the teaching. The incident with the demon was confirmation. It was a bonus. It was the frosting. But they went home talking first about the intrinsic authority with which Jesus taught.

William Willimon writes that as a young preacher he decided to find out what people really got out of his preaching. So, one morning at the end of a service, he had a young acolyte handout a sermon survey that featured one question: “What idea do you remember from today's sermon?”

The results were depressing. Some who responded couldn't even remember one idea. Some, while listing an idea, listed the wrong idea. Some listed ideas that weren't even in the sermon.

Disheartened, discouraged, and disgusted Willimon went to a wise woman in the congregation for comfort or counsel. Her response:

*Where did you get the idea that a sermon was about ideas? Everybody knows that the purpose of a sermon is to meet Jesus and be amazed that he hasn't given up on us yet.*

Dear friends, the good news is that in following Jesus we encounter God.

The remarkable claim of the gospels is that God is not an idea but is incarnate in Jesus of Nazareth. And equally remarkable: Jesus has not given up on us and is present among us, and among our brothers and sisters in Roseland, even today.

Look. I don't know how the authentic authority of Jesus gets missed or ignored in such a way that he is betrayed and denied and ultimately murdered by the masses.

Maybe it's evidence that we're more comfortable with lies than hard truths.

Maybe it's evidence that we can turn our back on authority when it runs counter to our expectations.

Maybe it's evidence that an itinerant rabbi from a scrub brush town who first went to those for whom life was brutish and short was the last place anyone expected to encounter the authority of God.

Maybe it's just evidence of being human – as we too so easily deny, miss, ignore, or betray Jesus today....

But I also know that we keep coming back, eager to meet Jesus, and longing for authentic connection that we too might go home astonished and proclaiming that Jesus is the Holy One of God.

So dear friends, even today, whatever our lot in life, may we follow Jesus and in following encounter the authentic and authoritative presence of God.

Amen.