

The Inauguration of Salvation

Mark 1:21-28

Cradock Presbyterian Church

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Unless you've been living in a cave without TV the last couple of weeks, you're bound to know about the Inauguration we're about to see. I think back to four years ago. After many campaign promises, and a lot of buildup, and, dare I say, a lot of hope, President Obama took office. And, wonder of wonders, he actually began doing some of the things he said he would do! He said he would appoint a cabinet that had members of both parties in it – and he did! He said he would not just sit in the White House, but would go to Capitol Hill to work with the lawmakers – and he did! He said he would end our occupation of Iraq – and he has! He said he would devote everything to eliminating Osama Bin Laden – and it has been done. To me, this is a little bit unbelievable – a President who actually does what he said he would do. When you put that together with all the hopes people had in him, it's no wonder he got reelected. I pray he can keep it up! – because if he does, we'll all be much better off.

In this story from Mark, the earliest public story of Jesus in his ministry, we see an inaugural speech, and his first action in living out the “promise” that Israel was looking for, the promise of a Messiah; we see the hope they would place in him begin to grow. But this wasn't like the other “inaugurals” of supposed saviors gone by. This wasn't a “second term” guy who would end up being a lame duck. Here was somebody, and some *thing*, totally new. I looked at this real hard. Listen to what I found.

We know from the Gospels that Jesus initially had the crowds with him. Matthew reports that he began proclaiming, “Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand.”

That's not as snappy as "Change We Can Believe In," but it's a lot more powerful! He also says that Jesus' preaching was gladly received, and that he continued to go around healing and exorcising demons in their synagogues. Luke reports that Jesus' fame spread rapidly, and that he was sought after to preach and teach. Luke reports also his first controversy with the powers—that-be coming from one of these sessions. We talk about a President's "First 100 Days." If you look at Jesus' first however-many-days, he was a raging success.

So this story from Mark makes sense, seems to fit. Jesus was teaching here in this first appearance, and you can liken it to an Inaugural Speech. People were warming up to it; the hope was building. You can imagine them thinking: "Maybe, just maybe, this guy really *is* something new, something to believe in! But we'll have to wait and see. After all, we've been duped before." They were probably remembering that just prior to Jesus' time, a zealot rose up and declared himself the Messiah, got a large number of people to follow him, and staged a rebellion against the Romans, claiming God would come to their aid. You know how that one turned out! So people were gonna be a bit wary; they were gonna need a little more than just words, even words as good as the words Jesus was laying on them. People then as now want to see some proof. All that talking is fine, but it won't get things done. Jesus' teaching needed some fruit. Just as our President needs to back up his speech with action, so Jesus is going to need something to show them who he is. They don't have to wait long...

...because busting onto the scene comes a man possessed by a demon. Now let's don't get into the whole business of "well, he had some sort of psychiatric disorder" or "he was an epileptic" or anything like that! It doesn't matter what he actually was. He needed saving. He needed healing. He needed Jesus to put things right in his life. What mattered to those people was their perception that something was horribly, horribly wrong at the core of this man's being. They had a name for it – they called it "demon possession". Good enough. We'll go with their beliefs, because Jesus was working with *them*. Now we know that the people were already astounded by Jesus' teaching, because, as the text says, "he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes." I guess so! If you're the son of the one who gave us scripture, I think you know how to teach it pretty well! But more than that – Jesus was exuding that presence and power of the Holy Spirit that was his essence.

As Mark always gives it to us, the action is abrupt: in the original, *immediately* this man shows up, and he's a mess. He's repulsive! When a person is said to have an "unclean spirit", it usually means they're a bad thing to look at, too. Evil has a way of distorting you! You get ugly! We don't know what his deformities were; we can be sure that he was isolated from the rest of society, because that's what they did with unclean people. There's no running away from this guy, either – he's *loud!* He's screaming at the top of his lungs; the word in the original language suggests cries like one would belt out for extreme injury. He's as bad as most of those special interest groups that drive Presidents crazy. He's being obnoxious, drawing attention to himself, just like they do!

What he's yelling brings things down to the lowest, scariest level: "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." *Us*. The demon and this poor man were inseparable, that's why he can say *us*. What's more, they believed that if a demon knew your name, he had power over you. He took you over. You'd *never* be able to accomplish anything as long as that demon had control. I guess that's how Presidents must feel, after their bills get defeated by Congress. I bet they wonder if Congress is demon-possessed! – or maybe just bereft of any common sense or care. I'm sure our President will have to deal with that soon in his second term. Nothing but obstacles! Well, everyone watching Jesus knew all about demon possession, knew all of its power-robbing characteristics. You can imagine those in attendance saying to themselves, "Well, too bad; I bet Jesus was gonna cure him, if he had half a chance. But the demon's got his name. Too late now."

So imagine their surprise when Jesus starts talkin' trash to this unclean spirit! He's not scared in the least! They knew you're not supposed to do that! – you're not supposed to be entering into a *dialogue* with a demon. You're supposed to avoid unclean spirits at all costs. If you consider how much more important a Messiah was to those people in the synagogue than our President is to us, you begin to see how powerful Jesus' departure from their expectations really is. I can just imagine the buzz in the crowd. "Look, Jedidiah – he talkin' to that demon! And ain't nothin' happened to him!" Quite a show of power, actually. But the best is yet to come.

I suppose Jesus could have muted that unclean spirit from the get-go, but he let him talk. Nice job by that spirit, in recognizing and identifying another spirit. His identification of Jesus was pronounced, loud and clear, for all the people to hear. "The Holy One of God" is just another name for the Messiah. That *should have* set the crowd to buzzing. But they didn't have time.

Jesus simply turns and speaks, no hesitation. "Be silent, and come out of him!" And then it happens. That doesn't sound too unusual to us believers. I mean, this *is* Jesus. But to *those people*, on that day, it was the most astonishing, miraculous, not-of-this-world thing they'd ever seen. See, when their "faith-healers" did their thing, they placed hands on the person, and recited all kinds of formulas, and burned incense, poured oil, and did all sorts of *crazy* things! There was – and is! – only one being who simply speaks and things happen. He's the one who spoke, and there was light; who spoke, and there was night and day; who spoke, and there was life. You get my point. Jesus did something only God could do: he simply spoke, and it came to be. Right here at the beginning of his ministry, anyone paying attention would have said, "He just spoke and it happened! Only God can do that! So... does this mean Jesus is God?" Just speaking and things happen, well, that's a human pipe dream. Given their egos, I know our presidents wish it could be like that! But when you consider the awesome power of a U.S. President, *and then* you compare it to *this* power – well, Presidential power pales to nothingness.

And so when they realized what had just happened, the people *exploded*. The original language is a little hard to translate here, you could do it a few different ways. I think NRSV has got it right. "What is this?" they are yelling at each other. We say the same thing to ourselves today. "What is this?!" You hear it all the time when people are surprised, or even mad. These folks weren't mad – but their whole world had just been turned upside-down. "A new teaching!" they say, and isn't that something? They connected Jesus' *healing* with his *teaching*. If we want to do justice to Jesus' ministry, we should do the same. It's not just a new teaching, it's one " – with authority!" It's teaching that has an impact on life – not like the stale stuff the scribes gave the people. Not like the empty, powerless words pouring out of Washington D.C. These words of Jesus are words full of power. They're full of life. That's true today, too – Jesus' word is still powerful and still life-changing for us, if we'll listen. "He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him." That's proof that Jesus was God – *and he still is*. At this first event of his public ministry, the crowds have clear proof that this man is indeed the Son of God. There were many more proofs to come – even down to today.

But do they understand? And what do they do? If, as we gather from the other Gospels, Jesus is preaching, "Repent, for the Kingdom of God is at hand," why don't they do that: come and repent in huge crowds? It's because they go for the flash. Just like we do, they go for the big show, and they miss what's important. We love seeing the big things done by our President and elected officials. We watch when things like important bills that affect our life get handed down, regardless of what side of the

debate we're on. Do we pay attention to the big picture? About the direction we're going? I bet some of those people who marveled at Jesus on that first day were in the crowds at Jerusalem, yelling right along with the others, "Crucify! Crucify him!"

The inauguration will be over after tomorrow. Jesus' inauguration sort of ended that day and the next, too. The new term had begun. Not the Presidential term, but the new "administration" of our Lord, a new term that never ends. In a few weeks, Lent will begin, and we'll really get to see how this "administration" does. Stay tuned, pay attention – it's really important. Your spiritual life depends on it.