

*A Crisis in Faith*  
**A Sermon on Mark 1:21-28**  
**Fourth Sunday after Epiphany**  
**January 28, 2018**

**Introduction**

The Gospel of Mark and the letters of Paul are the most eschatological works in the New Testament. Eschatology presents a challenge for us today. It comes with angels and demons and unclean spirits. It talks about the end of the world.

How do we deal with that? If you tell people today that you believe in angels and demons, people will think you are strange. Atheists dismiss angels and demons as primitive superstition. Many Christians read it metaphorically—we all have our demons. I would like to take it seriously, just as Mark’s community did. Angels and demons were real to them, as real as God. It was part of their understanding of how God works in the world.

To put this belief in supernatural beings in perspective, it is helpful to look at how understandings of God evolved in Biblical times. The belief in angels and demons does not emerge until late in the Biblical period, 200 or 300 years before Christ. How did people get to that point?

**First Move: The Great Shift**

It is not God who is changing so much as it is how people perceived God. It is their theology and their understanding of reality that is changing.

James Kugel, an Orthodox Jewish scholar who taught Hebrew Literature at Harvard for 20 years, describes this evolution of faith in a new book, *The Great Shift: Encountering God in Biblical Times*. Kugel tries to show that how people understood God was connected to their evolving concept of self.

In the oldest stories in the Bible, people sometimes encountered God. Adam and Eve, Noah, Abraham and Moses all talked to God, and the Bible reports their conversation. These people really believe that they are encountering God, and the original listeners of these stories would have believed that, too.

When they encounter God, they are having a vision. It is like they are in a fog. They didn’t have a defined sense of self and agency as Western people do today. When they are having a vision, they believe that they are coming under the influence of something external to the self. It is a consciousness of hearing words and seeing

visions that do not come from the self but from the invisible divine world. Without a clearly defined self, outside forces pass right through them.

The Outside Powers cannot be dismissed as metaphor. It is part of a sense of self, the mental picture that we have of ourselves. It varies greatly from civilization to civilization. There is no default position. The sense of self is a mental construct, a way our brains make sense of the data inside us.

All humans construct a sense of self, but most people in the past were not individual selves in the modern Western sense. They do not experience themselves as clearly bounded but as seamlessly embedded in their tribes and their ecosystems. They do not think of themselves as unique but as more or less identical to others of their kind. They do not think of themselves as neatly integrated but as invaded by strange spirits and forces that may pull them in different directions. In the Western view, the individual is a separate, autonomous entity that consists of distinct attributes that are assumed to cause behavior. The porous self in the ancient world gives way to the bounded self today.

Abraham does not seem to have an inner life. He makes some of his own decisions, but his brain sometimes seems to be ruled by God. God commands and Abraham obeys. He is the father of faith because he does whatever God tells him to do.

Abraham's God is unpredictable and intervenes at every turn, commanding Abraham what to do. God acts spontaneously. There are no rules: a 90-year-old woman can give birth.

In the story of Joseph, we see something different. Joseph has interior thoughts. As the sense of self emerges, God becomes more distant. Joseph knows of God only as a remote long-range planner.

The story of Joseph is part of the wisdom tradition. Things do not just happen in this world: God is the great Unseen Creator, causing everything that humans do not cause on their own. Anything that does not have an evident human cause was caused by the divine. When Joseph was sold by his brothers to Midianite traders, it was part of God's plan to deliver him to Egypt.

The wisdom tradition is founded on optimism: there is a great divine plan that underlies everything. Whatever happens in the world is in keeping with a plan, a set of principles established long ago by God.

These principles, only some of which humans can discover, are nothing less than the operating instructions of the world. The core principle of wisdom is that things don't happen at random but obey long-established principles.

Patience was the cardinal virtue in wisdom teaching: wait long enough and everything will turn out all right.

Early Biblical texts proclaim Yahweh to be the God of Israel. Yahweh is the only true God, but the Biblical authors recognize that other nations worship other gods. God was the most powerful God among many Gods. This gave way in the late monarchical period to monotheism: God was the only God of all the universe.

A universal God is more remote and abstract. The God of Isaiah 2 and 3 is a huge and remote deity whose control of the world can hardly be fathomed by human minds. A deity who rules over all the nations could hardly be thought to exist in a body the size of an ordinary human being. God in Isaiah is huge: his throne must fill the sky--the whole earth is just a footstool.

Around the same time as people felt God was more remote, they began to believe that they had some inside of them, a spiritual essence. The idea of a soul began to emerge. *Ruah* was an invisible spirit dispatched by God. It changed a person's behavior. God did not invisibly slip inside people; instead God sent an invisible intermediary. Late Biblical psalms, such as Psalm 119, gaze inward. The soul in the late Biblical period becomes the meeting place of heaven and earth instead of the Temple.

There was another consequence of monotheism. If there is only one God, how can he do everything at the same time? One answer: he delegates responsibility to others. Angels and spirits carry out his orders. The late Biblical period saw the emergence of a cadre of independent angels.

If God is responsible for everything, where does evil come from? The Old Testament includes two quite different alternatives. One alternative: Outside Powers. Satan is a fallen angel with an army of evil spirits. Good and evil both come from heaven, but from different divine beings. The other alternative: evil comes from within us. This is what most people in the modern West believe.

The concern with eschatology arose out of a crisis in faith. A Jew would have been puzzled by the subjection of Israel to foreign empires. God chose Israel, but the divine favor of Israel is no longer apparent. God delivered the Hebrew slaves from Egypt, the mightiest empire of its day, but Judea later became part of the Babylonian Empire, then part of the Persian Empire, then the Greek empire, then Rome. And Israel was a rather unimportant part of all these empires for several hundred years. How could one possibly believe that Israel was the favorite of a universal God? Is God still all-powerful? Does God still care about Israel? It would require a Big Bang to change everything, to redeem Israel's belief in God's special concern for its fate.

## **Second Move: Authority to Teach and Exorcize Demons**

God sends the spirit to Jesus during his baptism. The spirit is the power of God. Jesus is now filled with the power of the spirit.

Immediately after Jesus is baptized, the spirit drives him into the wilderness. Jesus is in the wilderness 40 days, tested by Satan. Jesus proves to be more powerful; Satan can't deceive him and goes away. Now Jesus begins the mopping-up exercise.

Jesus begins his public ministry in Mark with an exorcism. The gospels emphasize different things at the beginning of Jesus' ministry. Matthew begins with the Sermon on the Mount. Luke begins with Jesus' unrolling the scroll in the synagogue in Nazareth and reading from Isaiah, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me." The power of Jesus will be a major theme in Mark's gospel. Jesus has the power of God, but it is a different kind of power.

Jesus goes to the village of Capernaum, the hometown of his new disciples, Peter and Andrew, on the northwest shore of the Sea of Galilee.

Jesus immediately goes to the synagogue and begins teaching. Jesus does not wait for an invitation to speak. It was unusual for visitors to speak in a synagogue.

The people are amazed at his teaching. He teaches as one with authority, and not as the scribes. Ἐξουσία, the Greek word for authority, is associated with kings in the New Testament. To have authority means to be appointed by God. It is one example of how the spirit has filled Jesus with the power of God.

To compare Jesus with the scribes does not necessarily mean that he was in conflict with the scribes at this point in Mark's story. The Greek word for scribe is γραμματεύς—it means someone who knew letters. It is the root of the English word for grammar. Someone who can read. A scribe reads the Torah from a scroll in the synagogue.

While Jesus is teaching, he is approached by a man with an unclean spirit. An unclean spirit is interchangeable with a demon. Demons are described as fallen angels in 1 Enoch and Jubilees, two books that were written in the intertestamental period, which is the period between the Old Testament and the New Testament.

The man with an unclean spirit would not have been welcome in the synagogue. Demon possession was often an explanation for mental illness. The stigma of mental illness today is a relic from ancient times.

The miracle is not intended to describe Jesus as a wonderworker. It identifies the exorcism as an eschatological event. God is drawing near to reassert authority over the world.

There is no laying on of hands in this exorcism. It is accomplished entirely through the power of the word. The power of the word is a very Jewish belief that

Christians have adopted. Jews and Christians are people of the Book. God speaks through the Book. Jesus' word is so powerful that the disciples drop their nets and follow him.

The focus is on the response of the crowd instead of on the man who has been exorcized. People are amazed at the presence of the supernatural. They don't know what to make of Jesus. Their immediate response is to connect the exorcism with his teaching. "What is this? A new teaching with authority? He commands unclean spirits and they obey him." The authority from God that reveals itself through his teaching carries over into the exorcism.

The underlying problem that the text addresses is the absence of God. Mark tells us that God is near in the person of Jesus.

Kugel says that in rabbinic texts, the kingdom of God, which he prefers to call the kingship of God, refers to an internal recognition of what is not obvious to the eyes. There is no apocalyptic event; God's kingship is something that one must accept upon oneself. God's kingship is internalized.

### **Third Move: Leaving Old Understandings of God Behind**

Many people have a crisis in faith today when bad things happen to people. They still have the same basic understanding of God as in the wisdom tradition. God causes everything to happen. Whatever happens, it is part of God's plan. If someone gets cancer, it is part of God's plan whether they recover or not. It is hard on their faith when a loved one suffers and dies instead of recovering. They question whether God cares.

Not everyone shares this belief. Old ways of conceiving things coexist with new ones. Earlier understandings of God are mixed with later understandings of God in the Old Testament. People have a mix of theologies in congregations today. The members of these congregations have different faith backgrounds. We have people who still retain Southern Baptist or Church of Christ theology from their childhood and others who are closer to Unitarians.

How do you repent and turn to God if you are confused about who God is? Or who you are? Do you see yourself as a wretched sinner? Or a beloved child of God? Judy told me this week that she doesn't want to hear *Amazing Grace* at Morris' memorial service. She doesn't like the line, "a wretch like me." The old understanding of self bothers her.

Contemporary understandings of God continue to evolve as our concept of self evolves. People today believe that they have much more agency than people in

Biblical times. Our understanding of self is much advanced, but some people still embrace old understandings of God. They literalize the wisdom tradition.

Pat Robertson retains this understanding of God. When Hurricane Katrina devastated New Orleans, he said it was an act of God to punish America for tolerating homosexuality. Most people scoffed at him. Few Christians today believe that God causes weather disasters like hurricanes and tornadoes. There is no way to explain with theological integrity how God could spare one neighborhood during a tornado and devastate another. We have to let go of the old understanding that God controls everything. There is a lot of randomness and spontaneity in the world. Stuff happens and it is nobody's fault.

We still have other remnants of the wisdom understanding of God. We tend to blame people for their illnesses. They could have eaten better or exercised more or gone to the doctor more. The person who is possessed or has an illness cannot be blamed. We put too much emphasis on personal responsibility. Jesus doesn't condemn the man who is possessed by an unclean spirit. He has compassion for him and expels the spirit.

We still feel an absence of God. We have a crisis in politics because we have a crisis in faith. In our society, especially in our political culture, people act as if God doesn't matter. Self-interest is a good thing.

One of my preaching professors told our class in seminary to imagine that a Jewish friend of ours is sitting on the front pew when we preach on a text that appears to be hostile to the Pharisees. Imagine how you would act if you really believed God was in the room with you. Or inside you. You might be a little less aggressive and a little more compassionate.

## **Conclusion**

One definition of God is what is really real. Angels and demons were real to people in late Biblical times. They believed that they were under the control of outside forces. God sent angels from heaven to communicate with people. People were tormented by fallen angels.

We have a similar crisis of faith today when we believe that God is distant and remote. People no longer believe that God lives in heaven just on the other side of the clouds. But they sometimes fear that God is absent.

Jesus helps us understand that God is near. The kingdom of God is within you. That is what is really real.