

Preacher's Block
Mark 1:21-28

This week I found myself STUCK with a severe case of preacher's block.

And because I'd like to be fully honest with you and fully human in my challenges as your associate minister, I decided to come out and say it.

Sometimes the Holy Spirit just doesn't come through...
at least, not in the way I'd prefer.

You see, each preacher has a sermon-prepping process. And while everyone's is different, if I share a bit of mine perhaps it will de-mystify some of what we do up here.

When I know that I'll be preaching, I look to the Revised Common Lectionary for a text suggestion. In this 3-year cycle of Bible readings there is a weekly selection from the Hebrew Bible, a psalm, a Gospel lesson and another New Testament text. So I get to choose from any of these ... or none, if I feel so moved.

So I pick a reading or two (this week it happens to be the Markan text), and I let these readings roll around my consciousness throughout the week. Maybe something will happen – for instance, I'll overhear a conversation in a coffee shop that touches on the theme of the reading. And I might use the occurrence as an example in the sermon, or perhaps it'll move my thoughts to something else entirely.

I keep the text in mind during my prayers or meditation, and eventually, a message emerges ... *usually*.

Sometimes the process is easier than others –
words will flow insistently onto the paper;
other times preparing a sermon is like pulling the
Holy Spirit's teeth.

Often I come to understand most of what I'm trying to say.
More often I hear a Word that I need to follow better myself.

There are times when I FIGHT what comes out on the page:
I can resist it all I want – but it doesn't do much good.

Always I try to trust that somewhere in all my prayer and preparation a message will find its way to you despite me. Yes, despite me.

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There is another piece to my preparations. I study scripture.

I dive into the stories and read between the lines.

Each week I seek the wisdom of Bible commentaries and various theologians to deepen and inform my own understanding.

They have much to say on this morning's passage:  
about Jesus' new style of teaching,  
about demons, about the synagogue.

And still I stand before you today with preacher's block.

Why do I admit this?!



“How are you today? Just fine thanks, and you? Okay.

Great. Have a nice day!”

Once in a while people surprise me when they answer in truth:

“Today’s awful! I need to go back to bed and start again.”

When folks do that, sometimes we’re uncomfortable and laugh it off;  
but other times we respond with enthusiasm or compassion.

It’s nice to encounter the real on occasion.

The apostle Paul talks about the early churches’ very human struggles in some of his letters:

several times he gives his admonition that “all of us have gifts – different gifts – none better and  
none worse than others –

*so treat each other that way!* Stop with the ego.”

He also left us with some of his own baggage –

Just think about some of his discourses on women.

But that’s part of being authentic. Sometimes we’re human.

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By interacting with Torah on a personal level,

Jesus was expressing the humanity inherent in Holy Scripture.

Perhaps he stepped into that pulpit and began with an exploration of the Talmud or Mishnah –
maybe he opened with the trusted authorities of his heritage.

He might have followed all of the familiar forms at first,

but as he spoke, he apparently changed tack...

He spoke to people’s whole lives, not just their minds. He was “being real”. People don’t often expect
that.

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Now, wanting to be sure I that had fully researched my topic, I looked up the word “authentic” in the  
dictionary.

I love words, and being more of a thesaurus person I expected to  
read a few synonyms first off:

*genuine, real, trustworthy;* or even antonyms: *false, artificial.*

But the first definition of authentic?: AUTHORITATIVE.

*Authoritative!* “Having authority”.

There is a powerful sense of authority that becomes known

only when we are truly authentic;

truly ourselves and present with as much integrity as we possess.

...So much for thinking I know a word.

But that’s just the point, isn’t it? Book knowledge isn’t the only means of knowing. Whether or not Jesus  
stepped into the pulpit with years of Torah study behind him, he was true to the teaching by giving of  
himself. He recognized the people’s need for soul-nourishment in this institution of learning. He stepped  
out of the established protocol to offer a new teaching – “with authority”, with *authenticity*.

And the people welcomed it.

They welcomed it and word spread about this authentic teaching, this self-disclosure of the Word, this  
personal connection with God.

Jesus is our model of authentic authority, the kind we long for and can trust without reserve.  
 He spoke the word and he walked his talk.

It is *necessary* to cite wisdom passed down –  
 in fact our deep value for knowledge keeps us from imprisoning ourselves in a religion of magical  
 thinking or oppressive doctrine.

With good reason we dedicate ourselves to the study of  
 historical place and time,  
 to the recognition of new learning,  
 and to listening for a Still-Speaking-God.

Jesus doesn't refute the scholars' studious referencing –  
 he infuses them with a new authority ...  
 with the authority of the Spirit speaking through the Living Word,  
 and with the authority of our own experiences of God.

Like the congregation assembled in the synagogue,  
 we long for that authentic authority.  
 We long to hear an authentic voice speaking.

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I know I'm not the first to wonder what to speak and how to speak it.
 But when we must speak, may each of us be guided to do so
 with an authentic voice.

Will you pray with me:
 Speak, Holy One, for we are listening.
 Speak with an authority that we can't help but hear and be amazed. Guide *us* to speak in and through you,
 following Christ in his teaching.
 This I pray. Amen.