

# Shepherd of the Mountains

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The Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany of our Lord  
January 28, 2018  
“Who Knows?”  
(or, “It Is Finished”)

Text: Mark 1:21-24

“*And they went into Capernaum, and immediately on the Sabbath he entered the synagogue and was teaching. And they were astonished at his teaching, for he taught them as one who had authority, and not as the scribes. And immediately there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit. And he cried out, “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.”*”

“*Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ*” (Philippians 1:2).

It is finished. *That* much is for sure. But the question is, was it heavensent, or was it of the devil? Who knows?

Among the locals, many of the opinions split along generational lines. A lot of the *older* folks found it heart-breaking to have to leave their homes, but many of the *younger* seemed to be able to see a silver lining within the cloud.

The cloud - the torrent, the tidal wave, the flood. It inundated 13 cities, and 140 towns, and 1352 villages. It put more than 4 million people out of their homes. It submerged complete factories, entire mines, and even whole waste sites.

And to think that the whole thing was *preventable!* To think that it was all part of a grand *plan!* A plan to construct the world’s *largest* - and most *contentious*, as it turned out - hydro power project. The Three Gorges Dam - not *gorgeous*, gorges (as in canyons, or ravines) - a giant hydroelectric dam located along China’s Yangtze River, one that, as of its completion in July of 2012, has the biggest installed capacity of any power station in the world.

A brilliant feat of engineering, or a social and environmental disaster?

Who knows?

An amazing water-control system capable of generating as much energy as *fifteen* nuclear power stations, or a legacy of lingering worries about pollution, landslides, earthquakes, and biodiversity?

Who knows?

Maybe only time will tell. But one thing’s for sure; one thing *everyone* knows. It is finished. After seventeen long years of construction, it’s done. Where once there was a dangerous stretch of river prone to deadly seasonal flooding, and navigable by only the smallest water craft, now there is a calm reservoir 640km - 400 miles - long, which ships as large as cargo boats and cruise vessels can sail with ease.

Fengdu was just *one* of the cities now completely *underwater*. Fengdu. The Ghost City. The City of the Dead. The place where, according to Chinese legend, the very gates of hell were located.

It all started thousands of years ago, back during the Han Dynasty (206 -220 BC), when two Taoist officials from the Imperial Court were said to have married and settled just on the outskirts of the city. Changsheng Yin and Fangping Wang. At least the way *we* would say it. But the Chinese put their surnames *first*, and so Yin and Wang, it was, joining in holy matrimony.

The Taoists believe the two became celestial beings there, making Mingshan Mountain a holy mountain in Taoism. But it wasn't until much later in the Tang Dynasty (618 - 907 AD), that the surnames were put together to form "Yinwang," meaning "the ruler of hell." Thus, people began to believe that Fengdu Mountain - or more specifically, the *City* of Fengdu - was the place where the ruler of hell, the King of the Underworld, the very devil himself, lived.

So it was no surprise that just before the city was flooded, citizens began putting up large signs around town, counting down the days until it would be destroyed. Or that many of them carried the symbol of the devil. The message was clear: Fengdu's days were numbered, and so were the days of the devil himself. The impending flood was not only going to submerge the city, but it would also swamp the very gates of hell, and drown its lord, the devil, as well!

The devil is "going down." Isn't that the mood around *our* city, *too*? Isn't that the mood around most of the cities in America, as we count down the days for - what is it now? - exactly one more week? You know what I mean, sports fans. The devil is "going down" - that devil of a team that knocked *your* team out of the playoffs. That devil of a team *you* love to hate. That devil of a team from the city you *don't* live in anymore, the one that's *dead* to you - The Ghost City, The City of the Dead.

Oh, the *big* money says it's going to be Philadelphia, of course. "For the 3<sup>rd</sup> straight game in the National Football League Playoffs the Eagles will be underdogs" ([www.cbssports.com/NFL/2018-5-5-b-adds-line](http://www.cbssports.com/NFL/2018-5-5-b-adds-line)). From the second the two Super Bowl teams were named, the word on Philadelphia - the story on the "BOO Birds" - was clear: It is finished. The Eagles were an instant 7-point underdog to the Patriots, a team that had to overcome a 10-point deficit just to beat Johnstown, or Juneau, or Joplin, or, what was it, *Jacksonville*?

But, hey, who *knows*, *right*?

Indeed, who *knows*?

And if you ask *me*, we don't have to wait a week to ask the question. We can ask it this morning. We *should* ask it this morning. For it's one of the themes of our Gospel lesson: "Who *knows*?"

We're still in Mark, Mr. Gospel-in-a-hurry, Mr. Bolted-right-out-of-the-starting-gate-with "this is *the beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God*" (Mk. 1:1). And the truth is, throughout his book, that's just about all that's going to be on his mind: setting out the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. Anything else he's going to race right by. Well, anything else except maybe that, well, the devil is "going down."

And the answer to Mark's question is an interesting one. Who *knows*? Who knows that Jesus is the *Christ*? Who knows that Jesus is the *Son of God*?

Look and see. It might surprise you. And even though we're still only in the first chapter, let's not forget where we've *come* from, right?

*John* knows who Jesus is. He's out there as the voice of the one crying in the wilderness, "Prepare the way of *the Lord!*" (1:3). He's out there preaching, "*After me comes he who is mightier than I, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I have baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit*" (1:7-8).

Oh, yes, *John* knows, all right. *John* knows Jesus is the "*Christ*." *John* knows Jesus is the "*Son of God*."

If he *hadn't* already known, of course, *John* knows because he heard it straight from One who knows - from God the Father Himself. For, remember Jesus' baptism? Remember that "voice" that "came from heaven": "*You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased*" (v. 11)?

Who *knows*? *John the Baptizer* knows. And *God the Father* knows. And we find out this morning that at least one "*unclean spirit*" (Mk. 1:23) knows.

Now, surely *he* got it from his *boss*, right? For remember what happened right after Jesus was baptized? Mr. Mark, Mr. Gospel-in-a-hurry, doesn't have too much to say about it, but at least he mentions it in *passing*: "*The Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. And he was in the wilderness forty days, being tempted by Satan*" (12-13).

"*Being tempted by Satan.*"

What does *that* tell you?

That tells you *Satan* knows.

The other gospel writers make that even more apparent. They show us exactly what the nature of Jesus' temptation was:

"If you are the Son of God [emphasis added], *command these stones to become loaves of bread.*" "If you are the Son of God [emphasis added], *throw yourself down*" (Mt. 4:3, 5).

Oh, yes, the *devil* knows, all right. *He* knows Jesus is the "*Christ.*" *He* knows Jesus is "*the Son of God.*" And so do all his *henchmen*. And so do all his *demons*. And so do all his evil - or in this case, "*unclean*" - *spirits*.

*This* particular one can't get it out *fast* enough! But now before *we* go too fast, too, and miss something important, let's back up just a bit.

"*And they went into Capernaum, and immediately on the Sabbath he entered the synagogue and was teaching. And they were astonished at his teaching, for he taught them as one who had authority, and not as the scribes*" (21-22).

John the Baptist "*baptizing*" and "*proclaiming,*" Jesus' baptism, Jesus' temptation, John's arrest, Jesus calling His first "*fishers of men*" (17), . . . and Jesus *teaching*. That's right, *teaching!*

Who *knows*? *Jesus* knows, *doesn't* He? For while, ironically, Mr. "Immediately" is in too much of a hurry in his gospel actually to tell us a lot of *what* Jesus teaches, he's constantly presenting Jesus as *Teacher* (e.g. 4:1-34, 7:1-23, 13:5-

37). However, if we could ask him, I'm convinced he'd tell us that he's *already* told us what Jesus taught - by the very way he started out his gospel. Jesus taught that He is the "*Christ.*" Jesus taught that He is the "*Son of God.*"

The "*unclean spirit*" sure got the message. Who *knows*? The "*unclean spirit*" knows:

"*And immediately there was in them synagogue a man with an unclean spirit. And he cried out, '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!'*" (23-24).

Only from the sounds of it, apparently Jesus didn't want unclean spirits teaching, did He? Or at the very least, He didn't want them teaching *just yet*.

"*But Jesus rebuked him, saying, 'Be silent, and come out of him!'*"

More to the point, it seems Jesus didn't want anyone - or *any thing* - teaching about Him until He first could establish just exactly *what kind of Teacher* He was going to be. Oh, and not just one "*with authority*" as we hear next:

"*And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying out with a loud voice, came out of him. And they were all amazed, so that they questioned among themselves, saying, 'What is this? A new teaching with authority!'*" (25-27).

And yet, even *that* reaction is helpful; we can learn from it. Not like any teacher anyone has ever seen, that is. Not like one who teaches only what's been taught before. No, rather, One who - in His teaching the same as in His miracles - exhibits a *divine* authority: "*He commands even the unclean spirits,*" the eyewitnesses continued, "*and they obey him*" (27).

Yes, "in the person of Jesus," Jesuit New Testament professor of theology Brendan Byrne writes, "one is dealing with the power and presence of God." God who has come to earth to establish His everlasting reign and kingdom. God who has come to earth to see that the devil, finally, is "going

down”

And yet, as I said, it's more than just "birth authority" - even a never before seen divine authority! It's in a way that no one in the world could possibly ever have imagined!

Who really is the "Messiah" going to help? Who really is the "Son of God" going to help? Ironically, Mr. Legend is a hurry seems to be in no particular hurry to show us. It won't be until halfway through his book - not until the eighth chapter as we divide his sixteen - that he's finally going to get around to showing us Jesus as the humble "Suffering Servant" that he's at last going to show us Jesus as the One who come to give us His life for the life of the world, that he's going to reveal for the first time that Jesus began to teach His disciples that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes and be killed, and after three days rise again" (8:31).

The "epiphany" of "Jesus Christ, the Son of God" (Mk. 1:1) here on the world's stage marked the beginning of the end of the devil's hold on sinful humanity. Jesus came to establish a new dynasty, a kingdom that knows no end. He came to conquer death, and in so doing, break the devil's grip on sinners everywhere. And in that great "flood" of that other "baptism" that Jesus told his first followers that He "[had] to be baptized with" - the one not in the Jordan River, but outside the city, at Golgotha, at Calvary, at the cross (Lk. 12:50) - after thirty-three long years of "construction," the world's true largest - and undeniably most contentious - hydro-power "project" would finally be completed. The gates of hell themselves would be swamped, and the lord of that underground "city," the devil himself, would be drowned. "It is finished" (Jn. 19:30).

Now, that drowned city - Fengdu Ghost City - contained a trio of attractions - three major tests that, according to Chinese traditional belief, a soul needed to pass in order to reach the afterlife.

The Naihe Bridge (known as the Bridge of Helplessness) was said to be the connection between the mortal realm and the Underworld. Those who were virtuous were said to be able to cross that bridge safely; but those who had led evil lives were believed to be pushed by demons into the watery underworld below, where they would be eaten by monsters.

At Calvary, that bedeviling monster himself - the king of the underworld - was swallowed up. "It is finished." The devil is finished. Death is finished. "Death is swallowed up in victory . . . through our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Cor. 15:55, 57 a).

The Guimen Gate (also known as the Gates of Hell) was said to be the place where all the souls of the dead were to have to report to the King of Hell for judgment, and where they would be issued a road pass, which would serve as evidence so that they could register in the afterlife.

In the flood of the downstream waters of our own baptism, we repentant sinners receive both a "pass" and a power: "We were buried therefore with [Christ Jesus] by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in new-ness of life" (Rom 6:4). Where once there was a dangerous stretch of river prone to deadly seasonal flooding, and not navigable by even the smallest water craft, now there is for us a calm reservoir which all of us in Christ's church - from the smallest to the large - can sail with ease.

"Gates of hell can never 'gainst that church prevail. We have Christ's own promise, and that cannot fail. Onward, Christian soldiers, marching as to war, with the cross of Jesus going on before" (*Onward, Christian Soldiers*, Sabine Baring-Gould, 1834-1924).

Tianzi Palace presented the last of The City of the Dead's three tests. Each person was said to have to stand on one leg on a large stone located right in front of the gate. A good person apparently would have no trouble, but an evil person would be unable, and would therefore be punished in the afterlife.

At Calvary's cross, Jesus stood, as it were, on one leg, his feet nailed together as one. And there right in front of that tomb in the garden where his lifeless body was laid, there *was*, of course, that stone so large that Mary and the women were worried about who was going to roll it away for them.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, who *knows*?

We can all add *our* names to the list, too, can't we?

However just as soon as we do, the question changes, doesn't it? Just as soon as we *do*, "Who *doesn't* know?" suddenly becomes the more pressing question. Who *doesn't* know that Jesus is the "*Christ*," the "*Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world*" (Jn. 1:29)? Who *doesn't* know that Jesus is the "*Son of God*" - the Father's "*only begotten*" - the One "*God so loved the world that He gave, so that whosoever believes in Him would not perish, but [rather] have everlasting life*" (John 3:16)?

Who *doesn't* know? Who *knows*? Who *could* know - who *will* know - by the faithful witness both of your lips and of your lives?

May God indeed grant it, for Jesus' sake. Amen.