

Nativity Lutheran Church
Palm Beach Gardens, FL
January 28, 2018

4th Sunday after Epiphany
Text: St. Mark 1:21-28
Theme: Teaching with Authority

In Nomine Jesu

²¹[Jesus and his disciples] went to Capernaum; and when the sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught.²²They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes. ²³Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, ²⁴and 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." ²⁵But Jesus rebuked him, saying, "Be silent, and come out of him!" ²⁶And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him. ²⁷They were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, "What is this? A new teaching—with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him." ²⁸At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.

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In lots of ways this was a spectacular "coming out event" for Jesus. I mean, casting out a demon is big stuff. That's called an exorcism by the way, and it was the opening act for his public ministry in Mark's Gospel. And it sure got the attention of the folks around him.

On the other hand, it was an awfully tough act to "trump" if you wanted to keep attracting more attention. But then again, this is Mark's Gospel ... and for Mark, drawing attention is not big on Jesus' list of priorities. In fact keeping the message quiet until the right time is really important for him. So ... why start out with a bang like an exorcism?

First clue? Well, let's start out with the chief actor in our text ... the one who shows up to counter and challenge Jesus. This man with the unclean spirit is something else! Raises lots of questions for us. Had he been possessed by that demon for a long time and "just then" entered the synagogue to disrupt things? Had he been in the synagogue during Jesus' teaching and was only now reacting to it? Or does "just then" mean that the man had been present, but now suddenly an unclean spirit took hold of him?

In any case, it's a disturbing scene that unfolds. In a house of religious teaching, where God's ways were to be taught and preserved, evil is found. Demonic power has a grip, even when and where we would expect nothing but holiness all around.

But who's really speaking here? **"A man with an unclean spirit"** cries out, it says. But is it the man with the physical body who speaks, or is it the evil spirit? While the speaker seems to have some special insight – **"you are the Holy One**

of God" – the text isn't very clear. And such is the power of unclean spirits ... of demons. They can "wrap us up" in their own evil. Sin exercises power over us, for sure, but also in and through us. We buy into and cooperate with the powers that oppress us. And that makes us, all too often, willing collaborators.

So the man with the unclean spirit speaks not only for himself, but for the power of evil within him—and within us. What does Jesus have to do with us, unholy as we are? **"Have you come to destroy us?"** Since we're joined in the unclean powers around and within us, we have every reason to expect that Jesus has come to destroy us. Yes, it's a fearsome thing to face the Holy One of God!

But the unclean spirit also was speaking far more accurately than he knew, or intended. Jesus has indeed come to destroy – but the object of that destruction is not us, his creatures, whom he came to redeem. It's the demonic, sinful power that has us in bondage to sin and death. While it may be difficult to tell to whom Jesus is speaking, it's very clear who gets the message. He casts out the unclean spirit, freeing the man. **"Be silent, and come out of him!"**

Yes, Jesus comes to stamp out sin. And he does so not by smacking us into line with lots of demands or shows of power, but by bearing sin – our sin – on his Cross. His mission to "destroy" is really a mission of new creation – for us. So, yes, the very powers of sin are destroyed by Christ, on the Cross. We sinners, however, aren't destroyed. We're delivered!

So now there's a new teaching and a new kind of teacher. One with authority. And the authority of Jesus has a twist ... it's that of gift and giver, not power and force. While he for sure has the power to exercise authority by defeating sin and releasing us from bondage, he chooses the authority not of power but of mercy.

And as that mercy claims us, it also changes us. It changes us not by anything we do, but by Christ's own liberating power. As we pass in ownership from sin to the Savior, the Holy Spirit of Christ works in us to conform us to Jesus' image.

But back to the Jesus and "fame" matter. As you might imagine, it didn't take long. After this incident Jesus' fame began to spread big time. And that's not surprising. Any time someone is released from unclean spiritual oppression it's like throwing a rock into water. The ripples spread out. And that's what our call is this week ... to join the ripples. We're freed from sin's power, so we are now sent out to live that divine freedom in the world. And while we can see that the house of God will always be a gathering of sinners, we leave as sinners who are delivered to go and bring the saving word of Jesus to others. To be ripples in the world's pond.

What that really means, given today's text, is for us to understand in and under and by whose authority we live. And today it's pretty clear. Not our own. Not our congregation's. Not the world's. Not any civic or civil authority's. Oh, we all

relate to each of them in some way, but today's text reminds us that we stand finally and firmly under God's authority, present in and through the merits of Jesus Christ for us, for all of our lives that really matter.

I can't help but recall what Anglican Bishop Desmond Tutu had to say to the Minister of Law and Order of South Africa. This was during the height of the Apartheid struggle in that country. On one memorable occasion he was called for a very public and very visible open hearing and in a tense and momentous assembly he said,

Mr. Minister, we must remind you that you are not God. You are just a man. And one day your name shall merely be a faint scribble on the pages of history, while the name of Jesus Christ, Lord of the church, shall live forever."

Well, in our lifetimes those words ... prophetic beyond what Tutu could have ever imagined ... have proven themselves to be true. Gone from our memory is the name of that feared Minister of Law and Order. But gone also is the regime and atrocity of apartheid that he represented. Living in the bright light of God's promise remain not only Bishop Tutu, who understood the truth about God's authority, but also those whom other authorities had sought to oppress but now are freed.

And what's true for Bishop Tutu is also true for us. What's not the same, though, are the questions and oppressors we face who want to pry us from the authority of God's reign in our world and lives.

I'm wondering, who are those "Ministers of Law and Order" over against whom we need to stand in our lives? Who are those who would replace the authority of God whose gifts are justice and mercy with other authorities that would repress and torture us?

Who are those who are just humans who would seek to play the role of God in our lives? Who are those in and for whom we can see the sufferers who need to be freed by our witness to the truth of God's place in our lives and world?

We know them ... and not all of them are far away from us in lands like South Africa. Many of them are folk whose presence in our daily lives are so familiar that they're easy to ignore – like the dreamers awaiting the first week in March .

I'm thinking of the jest I made when I first came to serve in an earlier interim in small town in western Ohio. The highway into town took you right past a Rooming House across the street from the Middle School. It looked pretty economical and I needed a place to stay, but the folk lingering out front didn't require a rose colored light to announce the purpose of they had.

I said to the leaders who greeted me that I thought I'd found a suitable rooming house in which to stay while I was serving them ... across from the Middle

School. Well, it was quickly made clear to me that it wasn't a really good idea. But I wondered and wonder whether those who lived there ... or in the rooms for rent cheap around these parts ... are they such folk as need a Desmond Tutu on their side through us?

And we all know some for whom the blessings that are part of the reign of God are critical but for whom access has been denied or withheld. Let us be like those who witness to the message and authority of Jesus in our text ... who can't help but share and spread that good news. Let us be ripples in the pond into which the message of God's grace and mercy has been cast.

In the Name of Jesus!

Amen

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Soli Deo Gloria