

Sermon January 31, 2021 The Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany

Grace, mercy, and peace be unto you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

They say everything has a beginning. It seems this is true for most things in general. This was also true even for Jesus, as this week's Gospel records events surrounding the beginning of his public ministry.

And they went into Capernaum, and immediately on the Sabbath he entered the synagogue and was teaching. Mark 1:21

Jesus and his disciples find themselves in the city of Capernaum. It is Saturday – the day of the sabbath, and time to go to the synagogue for worship. Jesus was accepted by the leaders of the synagogue, and he was invited to participate in the service and even give the teaching. So in this manner Jesus begins his work of salvation. Jesus is often remembered for his miracles. He caused the lame to walk, the blind to see, the deaf to hear and speak, walked on the water, calmed the storms, and cleansed the lepers of their incurable and contagious disease. Jesus even brought the dead back to life again. Jesus is especially remembered for these acts because they are interesting, entertaining, and profitable for us if we could experience Jesus doing the same for us. However, all these signs and wonders are not the substance of what Jesus does. So rather than begin his ministry with such signs and wonders, Jesus starts things off with the main thing - speaking his word of truth.

And they were astonished at his teaching, for he taught them as one who had authority, and not as the scribes. Mark 1:22

It's obvious from this account that things were going to be different from this point on. The Lord of all was in the house. The saving word of Christ was being spoken. The one, true authority had come and was beginning to set the record straight. Now things get even more interesting.

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." Mark 1:23-24

You may well wonder why inarnation a demon-possessed man was in church. I'm not entirely clear on the subject, either. The best explanation I have heard on this is that even demons have a "fatal attraction" type regard for Jesus, something like a moth being drawn to a flame. The moth can't resist the urge to fly into the light, even though the flame will kill the moth, so it flies into the flame anyway. In the way manner, the demon-possessed man, unable to resist the intriguing nature of Jesus, was in the synagogue nonetheless. The demon wonders why Jesus, the Lord of all, after all these years, has come to upset their apple cart and disturb the relatively uninterrupted pleasure such demons have taken in occupying human souls.

Again, we are at the beginning of Jesus' public ministry here. Jesus leads with the teaching of God's truth. Immediately following, we get the first demonstration of what it entails. Jesus was clear that in him the kingdom of God was indeed now at hand.

From that time Jesus began to preach, saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." Matthew 4:17

Now the demon that made its way into the synagogue that Saturday morning was a member of what we might call the kingdom of darkness or the kingdom of Satan. So here in this synagogue in Capernaum the kingdom of heaven and the kingdom of hell come head-to-head for their first contest. The result?

But Jesus rebuked him, saying, "Be silent, and come out of him!" And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying out with a loud voice, came out of him. Mark 1:25-26

Jesus took the demon down flat on the mat. It was no contest. Jesus holds all authority, and as he arrives on the scene, even the powers of hell are completely and utterly captive to his will. The people respond to all this accordingly.

And they were all amazed, so that they questioned among themselves, saying, "What is this? A new teaching with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him." And at once his fame spread everywhere throughout all the surrounding region of Galilee. Mark 1:27-28

On this one morning, Jesus kicks off his public ministry with a one-two punch. First, he speaks his word of truth with authority. Second, he exercises the power of the kingdom of heaven over the kingdom of darkness by dispatching an unclean spirit.

What does all this mean for us today? First, here at church, like at the synagogue Jesus visited, we don't want to skip past the basic fundamentals of the kingdom of God in order to get at things we feel are more important. It is good to have a nice church building set at the proper temperature with user-friendly bulletins, a good sound system, and hymns that everyone can enjoy singing. But the primary concern, just like in Capernaum, is to have the authoritative word of Christ front and center, properly read and properly taught. And equally important is that when we gather here we come in repentance with a willingness and even a hunger to learn the deeper things of God that this word of Christ reveals! The word of God is indeed a lamp to our feet and a light to our path.

Secondly, we want to allow the Holy Spirit to come among us in all his power. Notice again the reference to the evil spirit that was there in the synagogue with Jesus.

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." Mark 1:23

We understand that “unclean” here means “unwashed.” We know all about the importance of washing hands during this pandemic. We wash our hands for at least twenty seconds to remove the virus germs so we don’t get sick. Well, this demon was unwashed. It was therefore filthy, dirty, unclean, unsanitary, and unfit for Jesus’ kingdom of heaven. So Jesus released the man from the contamination of this spirit by expelling it from his soul.

Surprisingly, Jesus does the exact same for all of us. Does he not teach that we are all under the power of Satan, the chief demon, and are contaminated with the curse of death among others? We were unclean. We can still feel it today. John the Baptizer began the process of washing people and making them clean, belonging to God. That sacrament continues to this day. In our baptism, the power of the kingdom of God overcome the kingdom of death in our lives, we were washed clean. Now sin, Satan, and death no longer hold sway over us. We live in the power of Jesus’ kingdom, inside and out. And for those of us here in church today, we have yet another Capernaum-like encounter with the authoritative word and spirit of God. The words of the Lords Supper recount and remember the saving deeds of Christ, and his body and blood cleanse us from all sin. We are again washed in the blood of Christ and made clean – the holy people of God! The kingdom of heaven is here among us, expelling all the powers of darkness and death. For those who are receiving communion at home, the very same blessings are credited to you as well.

What follows for us who have received the power of Jesus’ kingdom? To start, it is natural for us to remain connected to Jesus’ word of truth. These are times when we don’t even want to open the news to hear more about the turmoil in our society. Many conversations are negative, filled with complaints about “how things should be.” Other talks are filled with worry about the direction things have taken in our country and the world. We get grief from rude drivers on the highway. People are always calling us for fundraising for some such organization or trying to scam us out of our money. We get more criticism than compliments. What a strength it is to stay in God’s almighty word daily where Jesus is our king and we are constantly washed from the uncleanness in and all around us. In the kingdom of God we have pure peace. The words of Colossians 3:16 apply well here, ***“Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly.”*** And why not?!

It then follows for us to actually live as citizens of the kingdom of heaven. Not engaging in a lifestyle of the unwashed - feeding, and even fomenting idle talk that leads to nothing but feelings of depression, hatred and the need to strike back. Leaving the works of darkness that create division between us and God and with each other, pushing us and other people down and making the world a worse place than it was before. Rather, as the bearers of God’s truth and cleansed by his power, we think, speak, and act according to that truth with all its peace and joy, and faithfully fulfill the good works God has given each of us to do according to our station in this life.

God bless you and keep you in the truth and power of his kingdom as together we seek him and serve him in his kingdom! Amen.

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