

Epiphany 4 2009 Year B
Texts: Deuteronomy 18:15-20
Psalm 111
1 Corinthians 8:1-13
Mark 1:21-28

“They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority.”

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be always acceptable to you, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer. Amen

Jesus sure has accomplished a lot since the beginning of Mark’s Gospel. In a mere 28 verses he has met John the Baptist and was baptized by him, been taken into the desert to be tempted for 40 days, he goes to Galilee and gathers his disciples, and now he is in Capernaum at the synagogue teaching. This is a man on the go, he is a man with a mission and he wastes no time engaging that mission.

Mark’s gospel is action packed. Mark tells us that Jesus “immediately” does this and “immediately” does that. We are told that the Spirit “immediately” drives him into the wilderness after his baptism and that when he calls Andrew and Peter they “immediately” left their nets and followed him. Jesus goes a little farther down the road and when he sees James and John, sons of Zebedee, Jesus “immediately” calls them.

One of the reasons I like this gospel is because it gives us a very different side to Jesus. In Mark’s Gospel Jesus is not portrayed as the placid, patient, gentle and serene Savior that we sometimes picture him to be. I know that there was nothing resembling personality types way back then, but if there were in this Gospel Jesus would be a type A. Perhaps I like Mark so much because I am a type A too. There are places to go and people to meet and tasks to be accomplished. This is my type of Gospel!

In today’s reading Jesus goes to Capernaum, a little village that would become his base of operations for Galilee and the surrounding areas. On the Sabbath he goes into the synagogue to teach. The people recognize that there is something very different about Jesus. They are used to listening to the scribes, the scholar-lawyers whose job it was to know the law, but Jesus was somehow different. We are told that Jesus taught with authority, power.

All of a sudden a man with an “unclean spirit” comes into the synagogue. This man is literally demon possessed. There is a power over him that he cannot control. The spirit, or more correctly spirits as the man uses the plural when he yells out, “What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth. Have you come to destroy us?” know exactly who this Nazarene is, he is “the Holy One of God.” And the answer to the question posed by the demons possessing this man, quite simply is, “yes.” Jesus has come to destroy everything that would hurt or destroy the people of God.

Jesus commands the spirits to leave the man, which they do only after violently convulsing him. We are told that the on-lookers are absolutely amazed. They see Jesus’ action as a new teaching. They see Jesus as having authority over even the demonic.

We have a hard time today picturing demon possession. Our impressions are colored by Dante’s Inferno, and perhaps more recently movies such as The Exorcist, or Blair Witch Project. In our day and age, we have a hard time picturing demon possession and as a result we have a hard time believing in it as well. But as Fred Craddock, a noted theologian and preacher, points out “No service is rendered simply by announcing that we do not believe in demons. Although that is true for most, not believing in evil has hardly eradicated evil in our world.”

Suffice it to say that belief in evil and in spirits that inhabited the created world was a very common belief in Jesus’ time. Our definition of demons may have changed over two millennia, but the Church has never doubted that they exist.

Last week at the baptism of Oscar Yanuck, the Bishop asked the godparents, “Do you renounce Satan and all the spiritual forces of wickedness that rebel against God?” and “Do you renounce the evil powers of this world which corrupt and destroy the creatures of God?”¹ The belief of powers that work contrary to God’s plan and against God’s people, is recognized even in our skeptical and enlightened age.

But if we concentrate on the exorcism, we are concentrating on the wrong thing. This is a story that has exorcism as a part of it, and in fact in this gospel we will hear about 3 more exorcisms, but it is not about

¹ BCP p. 302

the exorcism, it is about Jesus' teaching and acting. It is about this man come to earth who has authority over heaven and earth.

This is a story about Jesus' power, not the spirit's power. In fact, this story is really the whole gospel in a nutshell. In these first 28 verses of the first Chapter of Mark we see that God comes to us as Jesus of Nazareth, the Holy One of God, who has come to teach us about God's love for his people and to heal us. Jesus' teaching cannot be separated from his actions and this is where his authority comes from.

When we look at Jesus' authority we see something very different than what we normally expect because we see someone who claims not to have power over us through dominance, but through love. This authority is shown through service and action, through transformation of hearts and lives.

We are told that when the people in the synagogue see what Jesus has done "they were all amazed." And certainly amazement at what they had just seen would be a normal reaction. And I know that when I experience God's love for me, when I see the Gospel in action I, too, am amazed.

But we are loved into healing not so that we can be amazed, but so that we can serve. Gary Charles, a Presbyterian pastor in Atlanta writes, "Careful readers of Mark's Gospel are put on notice from Chapter 1 that the boundary-breaking, demon-dashing, law transcending Son of God has arrived in the person of Jesus, and he expects of his followers far more than amazement."²

Jesus didn't just speak healing words, he lived them, he acted them out to show the world God's power. As followers of Jesus we are called to move from amazement to action. We are called to reveal God's love and power to those who do not know it, can't believe it, or won't accept it. We do this not through dominance but through service and action.

If I had to name the biggest demon facing the church today I would not say the current dispute over homosexuality or biblical interpretation. I would not say that it is diocese splitting off and realigning themselves with other Bishop's from the Anglican Communion. I wouldn't even

² Feasting on the Word vol. 1 p. 313

say that it is the increasing secularization of society. What I would say is that the biggest demon facing the church is the disbelief that God's power is in us and that we can, through the power of the Holy Spirit, truly be transformed as well as be a participant in God transforming the world.

We do not claim that power of Pentecost. We do not really believe the words in Ephesians 3 verse 20, "Glory to God, whose power working in us can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine." If we claimed that power, like the man with the unclean spirit, our lives the lives of those we touch, would be transformed.

But transformation means change and change is scary and sometimes it is easier to dance with the devil that you know versus the Messiah that you are just getting to know. Easier, yes. Healing? Transformative? Not on your life. To dance with Jesus is to recognize his authority over every aspect of our lives. It is to show Jesus our demons and know that Jesus, through his authority and action in us, will indeed heal us. We are given a great gift to help us and that is each other, the body of Christ, also known as the church.

"The church is a visible, public and active presence in the world...and it is to be a sign of God's very visible, public and active presence in the world."³ We are the church, we are the ones called to reveal God's active presence. It is to us that God has given the Holy Spirit so that we can accomplish the amazing tasks that God lays before us. When we allow ourselves to move from amazement to action, not only are we transformed, we are given the power to transform the world.

And that is truly amazing.

Amen.

³ Preaching Mark, Ottoni-Wilhem, Dawn. p. 23

