

FOURTH SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY

“The Authority of Jesus”

Mark 1:21-28

Four weeks ago we began a journey – an Epiphany journey, if you will. A journey that would take us all the way from Christmas to Lent, from the cradle to the cross, and in so doing reveal to us once again that that baby born in a manger is none other than the very Son of God incarnate come to be the Savior of the world.

In our Gospel lessons, as they were appointed for the season, we’ve made various stops along the way. We stopped at the banks of the Jordan where Jesus was baptized by John. We’ve stopped in the wilderness beyond the Jordan where Jesus found his first disciples and called for them to follow him. We stopped on the shore of the Sea of Galilee where Jesus called still other disciples and where he promised to make them fishers of men.

Today we stop in a town called Capernaum – a town on the northwest shore of the Sea of Galilee and a synagogue where Jesus began his teaching ministry. We don’t know the exact content of that particular teaching because Mark doesn’t record it but we do know from other references in Scripture that his message was pretty much the same wherever he went – “repent and believe the Gospel. The Kingdom of God is at hand.” And we also know that he spoke with such authority that everyone was not only impressed, they were downright amazed.

Now the word that Mark uses for “authority” in our Gospel lesson can, in some contexts, simply mean “freedom of choice” or “the ability to do something” but it would seem that in this particular context it means something more than that. In this context it means “absolute power.” It means that Jesus spoke with “absolute power.” In his words, people found something completely unlike the usual cut and dried droning about tradition and the observance of manmade rules and regulations that they were used to hearing from the teachers of the law. There was little doubt in their minds that here was one with a special message, a teaching, so wonderful, so impressive, so compelling, that his listeners were, as one commentator puts it, “beside themselves with wonder.” And, as if to confirm that very authority they sensed in his teaching, Jesus turns to a man in that synagogue who is possessed by a demon and who knew by means of that demon that this Jesus was more than just an ordinary teacher of the law, that He was, indeed, the Holy One of God, the Savior, come to destroy the stranglehold of sin, death and the devil, and Jesus cast out that demon. Once again, Mark says that the people were amazed – now not only that Jesus spoke with authority but that he acted with authority as well.

Who speaks and acts with such authority? Who is it that when he speaks to people, his words burn within their hearts and when he acts even the demons obey him? Certainly he is more than just an ordinary man. And, of course, we know he was and he is. For he is none other than the very Holy One of God, the Son of the most High, come in the flesh.

For, in the end, only God can speak and act with such authority. That's why in his prologue to his Gospel, John identifies Jesus as the "Word" made flesh. He is the one through whom all things were made and in him was life. He was and is, as that demon of our text understood so well, God, come to free the sinner from his sin, to liberate the prisoner from the power of death, and to crush the oppressor, the devil, under his feet.

And while the world, in general, may not as yet be as discerning as that demon was, you and I who have been made the children of God through our baptism into Jesus' name are, for we recognize his authority by faith.

Recognizing that authority, that absolute power, is why we are here in worship this day. It's why we sit at his feet in Bible study and listen to what he says. It's why we not only listen but also seek to practice what he preaches. It's why we commune with him in the Sacrament of his very body and blood. It's why we seek evermore meaningful ways of serving him by serving his Church and the world. It's why we respond to his call to be his witnesses in this world with the words, "Here am I. Send me. Send me."

Of course, the temptation is always there for us to forget that authority in our lives. As sinners we are certainly prone to want to exercise our own authority – to call our own shots and to set the agenda for our own lives. For that and for all the times we forget Jesus' authority, we ask for forgiveness and, in that, help to submit to his authority more and more – not just to believe in him as our Savior from sin, death and the devil, but also as the Lord of our lives.

We are who we are by the grace of God through faith in this Jesus and as we respond to his power in our lives, he gives us authority to live for him and to work in his name for the building of God's Kingdom here on earth to his glory and honor. "Don't you know," Paul says in an epistle lesson from two weeks ago, "that you are not your own; you were bought with a price (a price, by the way, that we know was nothing less than Jesus' suffering and death on the cross). Therefore honor God."

May God help us honor him again this day by moving us to hear and see the authority of Jesus in His Word once again and may He enable us to submit to that authority more and more in our daily lives and ministries. And may Jesus' life be our life, may His will be our will, and may His work be our work this coming week. In Jesus' name. Amen.