

Rev. Timothy M. Crummitt

Fourth Sunday after Epiphany - Year B

St. Paul's Lutheran Church

Deuteronomy 18:15-20

Psalms 111

I Corinthians 8:1-13

Mark 1:21-28

01/28/2018

Gospel

The Holy Gospel according to St. Mark:

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.

The Gospel of Our Lord.

Prayer

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Authority

Good morning! I had been the pastor here for a few months when Sue got the call. After a request to put them on hold I heard her walk to my door and after a polite knock the situation was explained. So, steeling my nerves I picked up my phone and listened to what the woman on the other side was asking me to do. “Excuse me sir, are you the pastor?” she asked. I told her yes and she then explained her problem. “My friend has a demon Pastor. I need you to do an exorcism on her.” Now, we joked around about this in seminary, but I had ZERO training in seminary on what to do with a supposed possession. In fact, I hadn’t really made up my mind about whether they were even real. Now I was faced with two possible outcomes if I agreed to do this. The first was for me to go and try and do some sort of exorcism, not really sure or convinced of what I believe when it comes to said demons, and I would sprinkle some holy water, say some prayers, and then be on my way and everything would be fine. The second outcome was the one that scared me, say I show up and am confronted with my very first real life demon encounter. I think it’s safe to say that I’m not prepared for that sort of thing. So I did what any self respecting Lutheran pastor would do, I gave her the number for the nearest Catholic diocese office. Fun fact, supposedly every diocese office has a priest ready to go do an exorcism at any time. “I need a young priest and an old priest!” I said after I hung up the phone.

My hesitancy to take part in the exorcism was tied to the point of today's text. Do I think that I have the authority to cast out demons? Do I really believe I can do that? As interesting as the exorcism part of today's gospel story is, it's just there to illustrate a much larger point, that Jesus Christ teaches, speaks, and acts with authority.

First, let's get some background details out of the way. For starters, we're still in the very first chapter of the Gospel of Mark! A lot has happened! We've seen John the Baptist have some choice words for the Israelites, we've seen Jesus be baptized, and watched the barrier between heaven and earth be violently ripped open as the Holy Spirit descends from above. We've seen Jesus tempted by Satan in the wilderness and his time spent with the wild beasts for 40 days. Jesus called some disciples and now here we are, casting out demons and teaching in the synagogue. That's a whole lot for 28 verses.

Now a word should be spoken about demons. In the Gospel of Mark the words "*unclean spirit, evil spirit, and demon are used synonymously.*"¹ We tend to think of angels and demons in clear delineating terms nowadays. One side only does good and works for God, the others are the servants of the devil, doing his bidding. 2,000 years ago the lines were a little blurred. The world was full of stories of angels who did crazy stuff, not always acting on behalf of God. And demons were considered a part of the world that we lived in. Demons lived in the wilderness and had a much more active role in the world than being the henchmen for the devil. It was more like demons were a sort of wild animal. It was in the nature to behave a certain way, and the people of that time lived in ways that would mitigate that. Just as you put up a fence to keep away dangerous animals you took precautions to keep away from demons.

¹Williamson, Lamar. *Mark*. Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009. pp. 50

Now, to speak about authority. The gospel of Mark puts scribes in the same camps as pharisees and other religious leaders, and that camp was against Jesus. Regardless of historical fact, in this gospel they function as a plot device to challenge Jesus and his ministry. The scribes were the “*doctors of the law*” according to one scholar.² They read and interpreted scripture, handling disputes and helping others understand the text. So they’ve been training for this their entire lives. But in today’s story Jesus shows up and takes control of the class.

He teaches “*them as one having authority, and not as the scribes.*” A new teaching was not uncommon. Where we can tend to look for specific clear-cut answers in scripture the Jews of the first century understood that a clear answer was often ambiguous. So they argued, they debated and they discussed. But as I mentioned in my sermon on disciples, the best and brightest went on to become rabbi’s and teachers. The others who took on a trade were not as gifted. I heard one man explain that by the age of 12 they needed to be able to recite the entire first 5 books of the Bible from memory. By the time they were able to branch off on their own, they would have become well known, having spent years working at the job. So it’s a little understandable that this random carpenter from the hill country of Galilee just shows up and takes control of the synagogue.

Now, I’m not saying that God doesn’t work through every possible person, and that you need a fancy degree and several thousand dollars of graduate school debt to interpret scripture, but there’s a reason we have seminaries, and there’s a reason our church body trains pastors before sending them off to congregations.

² *ibid.*

So Jesus shows up and the focus of the lesson becomes on his ability in teaching. In fact, one commentator titles this section “Exorcism at Capernaum” but goes on to say “*The above title is useful for identifying the unit, but it risks drawing attention to the problem of miracle rather than to the real subject of the passage: Jesus’ authority in word and deed.*”³ So the exorcism works the same way in the story as it does in my sermon, an interesting detail to point at something larger, never intending to take up all our attention. We don’t know what Jesus says, we can’t focus on the content of his teaching, but it is clear that whatever it is that he says grabs the audience and makes them listen. We all have known dynamic people who just seem to be able to hold a room’s attention as they speak, and Jesus exhibits this charisma too. But it’s more than just a fancy new teaching and a captivating voice. Please don’t let that be your deciding factor. The history books are full of charismatic leaders who ran what was basically a pyramid scheme.

The authority that Jesus speaks with is from on high. Just as God commanded the world to be created with only the power of God’s voice, so too does Jesus speak with great power, his words having the ability to cast out evil spirits and reveal God’s plan for us in scripture.

This week 2 children were killed and 18 were severely injured when another student with a gun opened fire in a Kentucky school. Now, you can have the fanciest voice in the world, know more scripture than anyone else and be able to hold anyone’s attention during a speech and that won’t do a darn thing for those kids. But Jesus Christ can. Where human beings fail, our God succeeds. Because it’s only the authority of Jesus Christ that has the power over life and death. It’s this crazy guy from Galilee and Nazareth who speaks with authority over our sin and

³ Ibid. pp. 49

failings. Where we can only offer hugs and words of comfort, Jesus Christ speaks into our world with a new message, with a new teaching; it's a teaching that proclaims that all pain will be healed, all injuries will be made well. Suffering will be no more, death is not the end! Rejoice! For the Kingdom of Heaven has come near! Amen.