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Epiphany 4 Series B 2018

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Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany, January 28

Today all three readings revolve around authority. Paul speaks to us using our freedom, which is really an authority, to the destruction of another's faith. Of course he doesn't like that sort of authority. The OT and the Gospel lessons speak to the authority which God vests in prophets, and especially The Prophet, who followed Moses and whom Christians universally name as Jesus the Messiah. Of course, the adherents of Islam would suggest that another is The Prophet.

We have often discussed authority in this group. We have remembered that authority can be an authority to do something good, as well as the fear inducing authorities we are more used to. Think of appearing before a judge. A summons of that sort is not heard as good news. But if it is a probate court and he is handing out the estate of some long lost and wealthy great aunt, this could be a very good authority indeed.

The authority we consider today is a little different, it is of course the authority under which I live, but it is also a cosmic sort of authority. Jesus tells the demons where to go, and they go. The prophet who follows Moses will have the very words of the creator in his mouth and that means the creation itself is also the object of his prophecy. There is no one who is given the option of listening to this prophet. The one who does not listen must answer to God himself. Likewise, the prophet must speak the word with God has put into his mouth and not falsely, or he too will have to answer to God. Of course, Jesus rather answers that whole question. Of course he has the words of God in his mouth. He is God!

That Christ's authority extends even to his most rebellious creatures, the demons, has real implications for the person of faith. First of all it is very good news that there is no enemy of ours who will not have to own up to Jesus as its master. The last of these enemies to be subjected, said Paul, is death. Even that one must give up its prey and surrender you and me to his Word of Life. But also the thing that makes me afraid today, even if it is not death, but it could be suffering, pain, poverty, guilt, arthritis, grief, or just about anything else. They all are subject to him. That is a great deal of what the ministry of Jesus establishes for us. He goes about and does good, healing every sickness, raising the dead, calming the storms, even casting out the demons.

It is significant that Mark starts the ministry of Jesus off with this account of Jesus casting out a demon. For the people of the ancient world, and in many parts of the world today, demons are a real threat, a part of their world. I think our enemy smiles at our foolish assumption that these were merely manifestations of mental illness, some sort of a seizure or psychosis. Such ignorance gives him many opportunities among us. Mark wants us to know from the beginning that this is a mission to the very heart of the matter, a mission to the things before which we are absolutely helpless and we have a defender, a helper.

Jesus is revealed in this epiphany tide as wielding divine authority which extends far beyond my life. The preacher will also want to be aware that this is something of a set up. In just a few verses we will see a man who has had his leprosy cured, but unlike the demons whom Jesus

silences by his authority, the leper will ignore the direct command of this authoritative Jesus and tell everyone about him. We will have to wrestle with that in a week or so.

Collect of the Day

Almighty God, You know we live in the midst of so many dangers that in our frailty we cannot stand upright. Grant strength and protection to support us in all our dangers and carry us through all temptations; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy spirit, one God, now and forever.

What are the dangers we face? The preacher will want to ask that as he thinks about this sermon? It would be easy to jump to an unsettled situation in the world of international relations. The Russians are rumbling, ISIS is gruesomely executing prisoners, the government is shut down as I write this, and of course the mortality rate for human beings remains stubbornly high at 100%. Focusing on this obvious danger which we see on the evening news might mask many other dangers. Are we the biggest danger to ourselves? Do we take for granted that we are constantly surrounded by dangers? Some of them are physical. The wall of the veins in your temple are about a millimeter thick, if there is one little weak spot in that vein and it should burst, we will die almost instantly. Are the dangers the things that go on around us? We all remember that time when we almost stepped in front of a bus because we did not look both ways. But are these dangers of another sort entirely? What about the less obvious things? The powers and spirits of which Paul speaks and the sin which infects us are also dangers to us. Is God a great danger to us? Of course Satan is, he would constantly tempt us to think that our sins condemn us. But for the sinner, the holiness of God is a danger. God's holiness annihilates evil.

As they often do, the prayer today assesses us in terms which our old man and the culture at large is simply not ready to admit, at least on most days. We live in dangers, that we can admit, but that our frailty would prevent us even from standing upright is really too much to say. We may admit the situation is hopeless, but we have a romantic image of standing up in the face of even our own death and facing it like men. In fact, in the state of Oregon, you can petition a doctor to prescribe enough drugs to kill you if you have been diagnosed with a terminal illness and the docs estimate you have got less than six months to live. You won't have to face death lying down that way, suffering and without your dignity. We would rather die than lose our agency and ability to make decisions for ourselves. And in so doing we tell God that his blessings are not enough for us, we must take it into our own hands.

Yet, this prayer seems to suggest that when I comes to some dangers I am as frail and helpless as the elderly man or woman I visit in the nursing home who cannot get out of bed!

Our standing and our agency in this regard are really something of an illusion aren't they? One of my colleagues used to say it this way. He was frustrated that people would say about a loved one who was dying that they would soon "go to heaven." He hated that phrase, he said he did not know how to "go to heaven." He could not chart a direction after death; he did not have the least clue about where to "go" after he died. He would make a total muddle of finding anything

after death. No, he insisted that the most correct way to say it was that Jesus would come and take him to heaven, like a toddler who had fallen asleep in the back seat of the family car on the way home. He wakes up in the morning on his own bed, he doesn't know how he got there; he is just there. Likewise when it comes to heaven, I will need to be carried there, helpless and infant-like. When it comes to real decisions, real journeys to make, I am more helpless than a child.

I really believe that the Devil fosters this sense of independence which so many of us, myself included, love to cherish and hold dear. As long as I have this illusion that I am in control of my life, I have a little less room in there for God, I have a little less space for the Rescuer and the Victor over my mortal enemies of Sin, Death, and Devil.

So the prayer gives voice to the reality which needs to govern our lives. We are in desperate need of God's help in this battle. Our only ability even to stand in the midst of these realities comes only from God. But it does come, and that brings us to the other temptation to which we often succumb, the temptation to despair. The Devil's first choice is to keep us ignorant and blithely unaware of our real situation. But should we awaken to it, he is just as happy to have us abandon hope and give up. The Christian however acknowledges his fundamental incapacity, but in that admission becomes, through the work of the Spirit, the very instrument of the enemy's defeat. God wages his battle against the enemies of this world through the frail and the weak, through the dying and the sinful people whom he has called. They are supported and carried, the prayer of today is answered.

The preacher navigates a path between both poles here and that tension is in fact necessary for us. It provides the energy of our preaching. I am reminded of Paul's words in II Corinthians 4.

⁷ But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us. ⁸ We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; ⁹ persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; ¹⁰ always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies. ¹¹ For we who live are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh. ¹² So death is at work in us, but life in you.

Readings

Deuteronomy 18:15-20

⁹ "When you come into the land that the LORD your God is giving you, you shall not learn to follow the abominable practices of those nations. ¹⁰ There shall not be found among you anyone who burns his son or his daughter as an offering, anyone who practices divination or tells fortunes or interprets omens, or a sorcerer ¹¹ or a charmer or a medium or a necromancer or one who inquires of the dead, ¹² for whoever does these things is an abomination to the LORD. And because of these abominations the LORD your God is driving them out before you. ¹³ You

shall be blameless before the LORD your God,¹⁴ for these nations, which you are about to dispossess, listen to fortune-tellers and to diviners. But as for you, the LORD your God has not allowed you to do this.

¹⁵“The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your brothers—it is to him you shall listen—¹⁶ just as you desired of the LORD your God at Horeb on the day of the assembly, when you said, ‘Let me not hear again the voice of the LORD my God or see this great fire any more, lest I die.’¹⁷ And the LORD said to me, ‘They are right in what they have spoken.¹⁸ I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brothers. And I will put my words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him.¹⁹ And whoever will not listen to my words that he shall speak in my name, I myself will require it of him.²⁰ But the prophet who presumes to speak a word in my name that I have not commanded him to speak, or who speaks in the name of other gods, that same prophet shall die.’²¹ *And if you say in your heart, ‘How may we know the word that the LORD has not spoken?’—²² when a prophet speaks in the name of the LORD, if the word does not come to pass or come true, that is a word that the LORD has not spoken; the prophet has spoken it presumptuously. You need not be afraid of him.*

This text raises first and foremost a rather interesting issue for us. The real problem we face as broken and sinful people is not primarily a Satan problem or even a death problem, it is a God problem. The holiness of God does not tolerate the sinfulness of this rebellious creature. The people of Israel at Horeb seemed to sense that and asked that they not hear God straight up any more. And God says that is smart, he commends them for realizing this and establishes the office of prophet to serve as an intermediary, so that they would be buffered from the experience of unfiltered God in all his consuming majesty and glory.

I have given us a little more this chapter because these important words about prophets and prophecy are embedded in a larger conversation which needs to be heard. The earlier part of the chapter is important because it give us a sense of what the alternatives were. Child sacrifice and divination were forbidden in the strongest terms. They are an abomination to God and us. What marks all these practices and the beliefs about God which they foster is the idea that we are somehow in control of this situation. Necromancy and divination, sacrificing children and palm reading are really vain attempts on the part of the human being to seize some control over life.

Of course, as a sacramental Christian, the words of the text we will read warm the cockles of my heart. God is not likely to visit anyone straight up, not because he could not do that, but because they could not handle that. He will come through some means, a person, a thing, which can mediate his presence, behind which he can hide his glory and power, so that he may speak his words of love to us.

If you take nothing else from this little reading, remember that you are handling holy things when you ascend to that pulpit on Sunday morning, when you stand at that altar and lift up that chalice. The words you say are instruments by which God will touch the hearts and minds of the people who listen to you and by which he will work his gracious change in their lives. Your

voice, this sermon, your words, are instruments for his love. In the same way, the elements of the sacraments are holy things which deserve our respect.

Of course there is much more than that here, whole sermons to preach. The Christian reads this text and hears the good news that God is talking about the one who is greater than Moses, The Prophet, whose words will transcend all those who came before him and after, because he speaks as the very son of God, with an authority which belongs only to him. What sweet news when he speaks today words of forgiveness and love to us.

But remember that is not how many of your people will hear this. Several years ago when I was in Scotland, I attended the Scripture and Theology seminar at the school of theology. It was a marvelous experience, but I distinctly remember one day when we were speaking about the authority of Scripture and I could not figure out what this guy was saying that was just out of sync. He kept asserting the authority of scripture but it just did not sound right and then I realized that he heard the word authority and could only hear that as the authority to tell him what to do. While I am sure he would also accord to God this authority it was as if he could not understand that the authoritative voice of Scripture also spoke authoritatively in a descriptive sense. He could not see that the Bible also spoke authoritatively of what God did for him, of who he was as both a sinner and as a redeemed child of God. Its authority was that of a rule book, a guide to life, purely prescriptive, not descriptive authority.

I wonder how many of our parishioners sing familiar songs and hear words like this, and manage to turn it all into a rule for life, a guide for living, a manual on what they are supposed to do? We might sing those same songs and hear those same words and rejoice that God has spoken authoritatively to us, but they can only find the petty solace of a burden laid on them. It is a solace of a sort, that there is something that they are supposed to do. But it is a heavy and dreadful life to live sometimes.

This prophet does speak authoritatively, and God will require that his voice be heard. Our human nature immediately leaps to the idea that this means we have to listen to him and do what he says. This is not wrong, mind you, and there are many times when my life has fallen short of a faithful listening to him. But this is not all directed to me and you. You see, Jesus speaks to the grave and it gives up its prey. Jesus speaks to the demons, and they relinquish their hold on troubled minds, Jesus speaks to wind and waves and they are still at his command. His authoritative voice not only orders and directs my life, but it also saves me from my enemies.

The preacher is a prophet of sorts. He proclaims the reality that God has decreed and created in Christ, the Word. We too often limit our understanding of prophet to being a foreteller, but this is not the role of the prophet entirely. The prophet was more often to look at the world right now and declare what God says about that. In that sense a preacher is a prophet.

But divine prophets often work at a disadvantage in that he/she cannot say more or less than God has said. The world hungers for certainty which we sometimes cannot give. We cannot offer

the world the sort of finality or simple answers which it wants. And so it often turns to the false prophet who offers them what they want to hear.

Psalm 111

Praise the LORD!

I will give thanks to the LORD with my whole heart,
in the company of the upright, in the congregation.

² Great are the works of the LORD,
studied by all who delight in them.

³ Full of splendor and majesty is his work,
and his righteousness endures forever.

⁴ He has caused his wondrous works to be remembered;
the LORD is gracious and merciful.

⁵ He provides food for those who fear him;
he remembers his covenant forever.

⁶ He has shown his people the power of his works,
in giving them the inheritance of the nations.

⁷ The works of his hands are faithful and just;
all his precepts are trustworthy;

⁸ they are established forever and ever,
to be performed with faithfulness and uprightness.

⁹ He sent redemption to his people;
he has commanded his covenant forever.
Holy and awesome is his name!

¹⁰ The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom;
all those who practice it have a good understanding.
His praise endures forever!

The psalm again speaks the words of the faithful Christian who has heard today's readings. God has caused his righteousness to be remembered. He has done these things. He sent redemption to his people and commanded his covenant forever. Notice that God is the subject of all these verbs. Our human nature likes to be the subject of the verbs. We like to think that we are the people who make the difference.

The final verse is perhaps one of those familiar verses. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. What does it mean that this fear is engendered in the list of divine actions which are listed out above?

On a translational note: the opening phrase in Hebrew is simply "Hallelujah!" That served the Church for many years. We did not need to translate it. Do we need to now? What has changed? Are we just not able to learn what that word means?

I Corinthians 8:1-13

Now concerning food offered to idols: we know that “all of us possess knowledge.” This “knowledge” puffs up, but love builds up. ² If anyone imagines that he knows something, he does not yet know as he ought to know. ³ But if anyone loves God, he is known by God.

⁴ Therefore, as to the eating of food offered to idols, we know that “an idol has no real existence,” and that “there is no God but one.” ⁵ For although there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth—as indeed there are many “gods” and many “lords”—⁶ yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist.

⁷ However, not all possess this knowledge. But some, through former association with idols, eat food as really offered to an idol, and their conscience, being weak, is defiled. ⁸ Food will not commend us to God. We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do. ⁹ But take care that this right of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak. ¹⁰ For if anyone sees you who have knowledge eating in an idol's temple, will he not be encouraged, if his conscience is weak, to eat food offered to idols? ¹¹ And so by your knowledge this weak person is destroyed, the brother for whom Christ died. ¹² Thus, sinning against your brothers and wounding their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ. ¹³ Therefore, if food makes my brother stumble, I will never eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble.

Paul is working through the catalogue of problems which the letters and visitors from Cloe's house have brought to him. In chapter 8 he addresses the practice of eating food that has been sacrificed to an idol. We don't really comprehend this very well because our culture has changed so much. The ancient world was suffused with religion. It was everywhere. There were not really grocery stores or butchers such as we might see in our cities and towns today. The meat market would have been near the temple, of course there were enough pagan temples that one could hardly avoid them. The meat at the meat sellers stall had probably been part of a sacrifice. There is a marvelous story in Hesiod about how the Greeks fooled Zeus into accepting as his portion of the sacrifice the entrails and other inedible parts by wrapping them in fat. The meat, the edible part then became the stuff the people got to eat as part of the sacrifice. In the story Zeus was not terribly happy about it, but he was trapped by his own promise to accept the deal.

For the Corinthian, a gentile most likely, this would have simply been a matter of course, this was one of the legitimate places from one could get meat. The state of first century Greek religion was such that many people probably did not really believe the whole God thing anyway. Plato and others had pretty well demonstrated that the Zeus of these stories was hardly worthy of worship. The continuance of the practice was as much a matter of tradition and habit as anything, a part of the culture which people would defend but not actually believe. It is rather like the non-attending Christians getting worked up about the manger scene at town hall when the ACLU wants to pull it out. They might not be in Church regularly, but they want to see those plastic figures of Mary, Joseph and the shepherds among those hay bales in December. It just wouldn't be Christmas without them.

But for the new Christians in Corinth this presents a problem. Some of them have come to the more Jewish belief that there are no other Gods. This was a major change from Hellenism which saw world inhabited by thousands of gods. Others, however, thought that the pagan gods were demonic. Others might still have clung to the notion that there was a sort of divine competition going on and Jesus was simply one option among others. In any event some of the people within the parish it seems thought very differently about these things from each other.

Paul tells them to have a care for the faith of their fellow believer. Some see it one way, others see it another way, and if I eat this food sacrificed to an idol I may not actually be engaged in an existential act of worship, but the person who sees me eating it or buying it may not make that sort of a distinction. He or she might see me as saying that idols are really things deserving of such worship. Or they may hold that the idols are demons and I am now engaged, unwittingly perhaps, in demonic practices. Others might see that I have reversed my confession. The result might be that they are destroyed, they lose their faith.

Of course, today we simply walk into Safeway or Kroger's or some other grocery and pick up our pork chops and beef roast, all nicely wrapped in plastic and conformed the square shape of a Styrofoam tray, just like God intended it to be. The issue is utterly gone for us. Why do we keep reading this passage? It is because Paul in answering this question lays down a principal which is worthy for us to remember all the time. This is about more than just eating meat sacrificed to idols. The principal might extend to other activities. The faith of my fellow believer is precious to me. I need to exercise my freedom in a way which does not jeopardize that faith. I may even forego my freedom for that other person.

That said, however, the passage, especially verse 9, is often abused by people, as they confuse what might bother them with something which might cause them to lose faith.

My father remembered attending a pastoral winkel in the 1950's, a day and age when most men smoked. Across the street from the Lutheran church where they met was a very strict Methodist church. Citing this passage the pastors were encouraged to take their puffs behind the church at a break, not out front lest they "cause an offence" to their Methodist brothers. Now, I can certainly see the value of not purposefully sticking it to the legalist across the street in a mean spirited way, but can one really argue that anyone would lose their faith because they saw someone smoking out in front of the Lutheran Church? I never approved of the Lutherans in Utah who exercised their freedom by drinking their beer on the front porch of their house, but that was for evangelistic reasons, not I Corinthians 8:9 reasons.

Like the Matthew 18 passages, this verse often gets turned into a moralizing club which is designed to stifle conversation. We cannot have a real argument about something, put forward ideas which are troubling to some, because we might give an offence and this verse gets trotted out. As a result we have this culture of saccharine niceness which pervades and too often we are unable to have the really difficult conversations we need to have. We cannot address the shallowness of worship because we might offend the members of the praise band. We cannot really talk about money at our parish because it might cause someone to be offended. This list

could get quite long. The verse has been extensively misused to stifle healthy and good conversations because they make some folks uncomfortable.

But the result of this is often crippling to ministry. How can we add real depth to worship unless we are able to bring up the fact that it is shallow? Jesus has said that where your treasure is there your heart will be as well. If we cannot talk about money, haven't we thrown away a vital means to understand the human being who is before us and to help them?

Paul gives us a very helpful measure here. The person's faith is paramount. He will jump through any hoop to preserve and strengthen that faith. But I don't think he would have left the folks whose mis-belief distorted his life to remain in that mis-belief. There may well have come a day when he sat them down, explained the situation and gleefully dug into a pot roast that had been sacrificed to an idol just to make his point. In fact, you can also hear Paul's words on such a subject in Galatians 1-2 when he confronts Peter about eating non-kosher food in a Jewish context. Because no one was losing their faith over the issue, he calls Peter's actions just as problematic.

This is the thing that really bothers me. The reason not to eat the meat sacrificed is that people's faith is jeopardy. Do people really lose faith over the things we cite here? I don't think so, but the principle is put into the service of another value and goal. We won't have a fight, it is just too uncomfortable for us. Here Paul gives us the reason we should never be offensive. I think Paul would really disagree with this interpretation of his words.

So what does one preach about this. First, I think we preach that faith is terribly important, it is the precious gift from God which demands our attention, nurture, and care. Through that faith relationship God works his salvation to me and through me to others. We also recognize that not everyone is in the same place when it comes to faith. Yes, faith as small as a mustard seed can move the mountains because it is God who acts through it, but we should not take this to mean that Jesus commends tiny faith. I may bend over backwards for the weak in faith but I also work toward their growth and strengthening of faith. I dare not leave them infantile. Again and again Paul urges his readers to grow up, get off the pabulum and the milk and onto the solid food.

But perhaps the best news is that our faith, this gift of relationship from God, unites us to Christ. The one who attacks us, is attacking him, the one who blesses us is blessing him. We are one with Jesus. That has some clear implications about how we treat one another, yes, but it also offers any sinner precious good news.

Our culture needs to hear much of what Paul says here. He speaks of a freedom/authority we have which can be exercised to the detriment of another. Our expressive individualistic culture in which we swim and breathe would suggest that I have no responsibility to my neighbor other than "don't harm" but Paul extends that "don't harm" idea to a dimension which many do not recognize. Is the culture, the citizenry, the children of a neighborhood harmed when a strip club opens down the street? It is liberty which our constitution affords us, we may not actually visit

such a place, but does the mere presence of an establishment create a spiritual hazard to us? How would we articulate this?

Mark 1:21-28

²¹ And they went into Capernaum, and immediately on the Sabbath he entered the synagogue and was teaching. ²² And they were astonished at his teaching, for he taught them as one who had authority, and not as the scribes. ²³ And immediately there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit. And he cried out, ²⁴ “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.” ²⁵ But Jesus rebuked him, saying, “Be silent, and come out of him!” ²⁶ And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying out with a loud voice, came out of him. ²⁷ 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.” ²⁸ And at once his fame spread everywhere throughout all the surrounding region of Galilee.

And immediately he entered the synagogue and was teaching... We often forget that Jesus was a teacher. Asian cultures still have a sense of this, there teachers are revered. Herb Hoefler tells me that Hindu culture in India says that there three people you should treat like a God – your mother, your guest and your teacher.

What do you suppose made Jesus’ teaching so amazing and authoritative? The Greek word for astonished is literally “out of their heads.” How was it different from my preaching which seemed to leave such a small impact on the people to whom I spoke? Perhaps the problem in the prior sentence lies in the use of the possessive pronouns. Is the problem that I think of this as “my” preaching? What do you think?

Jesus must teach them something substantive and which was of such a character that it astonished them. Did he completely redefine their world? Did he re-imagine their relationships with God and each other? Did he proclaim something so utterly new or in a new way that they had never heard before? Do we teach the same thing but now we have simply grown blasé and tepid about the message which so gripped these people? Or is there something else involved with this? At several point I have mentioned the text by N. T. Wright entitled “Simply Jesus.” Much of that text revolves around grappling with what made Jesus’ proclamation and claims about himself so revolutionary.

When the text shows Jesus speaking authoritatively, it is not to me or another wretched sinner. The intended audience here is none other than a demonic presence, an evil infestation. The evil one owns up to who Jesus is, but Jesus does not seek his words, even though they are true. He silences the demon and casts the foul thing out of the man. The only obedience he seeks in his authoritative speech in this pericope is that the demon get out, and his authority indeed is sufficient. The demon is cast out.

The people are amazed, the authority of this new teacher, this new Rabbi, extends even to the spheres of the demoniacs, the really incorrigible and impossible cases. There doesn't seem to be any sort of a problem he cannot solve. Despite Jesus' apparent desire stated elsewhere, the fame of Jesus spreads. You can imagine why that would be. The Jesus movement has gone viral, in current computing terms. It is like that video of a kid who stuck his tongue to a post in Hammond, Indiana a few years ago, or the famous light saber wielding kid who did not realize that there was a camera recording his play, or the elderly grandparents in Oregon trying to figure out their computer's camera and inadvertently recording the whole thing. Posted on YouTube these clips have become sensations, viewed by millions. That's what it means to go viral, when people just cannot stop talking about it and have to share it with a co-worker or a friend. They just could not stop talking about Jesus.

The man comes with an "unclean spirit." What do we imagine that is? Some have suggested that the unclean spirits, the demonic spirits, the demoniacs, are really just manifestations of what we would call today mental illness. Were they simply not able to clinically diagnose what we know be schizophrenia or bi-polar disorder.

This raised some questions for us.

- 1. Can we make the case that anyone who sins is actually under the influence (possession?) of a demon? We thought not, the sinful self is quite capable of getting ourselves into all sorts of trouble. What about a truly evil, psychopathic person who simply delights in the suffering of others? Is that a demonic presence?*
- 2. Has the devil been chained (Luke 10:18b and) and thus we do not see so many demonic possessions? But our friends from Africa and other places tell us that this is not rare.*
- 3. We remembered the Screwtape Letters in which the demons said that the best way to tempt the human was to get him to disbelieve in the reality of Satan. Is Satan purposefully hiding himself and does that somehow make his job easier?*
- 4. If we do assert that demonic possession is real and not mental illness, how does one distinguish between the two? It could be that the ancients did not distinguish this so much. But we might be able to make this distinction.*
 - a. Some physical manifestation. I have heard that a common sign of a demonic presence is a temperature drop not attributable to air conditioning.*
 - b. Knowledge which the person should not have. Here the demoniac knows who Jesus.*
 - c. Do they react to the Word/presence of Christ? Do they deny or hate Jesus?*

Of course the Scots used to throw these people into the ocean with their thumbs and big toes tied together. If they floated it was baptismal water rejecting them. If they sank, they must have been innocent. In either case it was a lose/lose scenario for the person whose thumbs and toes were tied together.

My African friend says that I am not a real Lutheran because I even have this discussion. He says that we read this text and wonder if Jesus is healed a mentally ill man or if there really was a demon. An African reads this story and is glad. They glad to hear that Jesus casts demons out. They are glad because the man who lives down the street has a demon and they are afraid of this man. They are glad Jesus casts the demons out and demonstrates his authority over them. We don't have a visceral fear of demons and thus we miss the real point of this text.

Has our "knowledge" in fact made us stupid about this?

Law

1. There are nasty things out there which do not have my best interests at heart. They fill my mind with lies, they cause my heart to fear, they urge me take matters into my own hands, and eventually, given the opportunity, they would oppress and torment my eternally because they know no other pleasure.
2. Against such enemies, I am helpless, I cannot mount a creditable defense any more than a field of dandelions can stop the lawnmower.
3. But my enemy knows that my helplessness is in fact what Jesus answers, so he fills my head with notions of my own sufficiency, my own abilities. He turns my eyes from my weaknesses and lets me trust the paper walls which I have constructed but which cannot help me on the day of my need. He soothes me with talk of nobility, dignity, and romantic notions of bravery and lost causes. In truth it is smoke and deception. Death and hell are real.
4. God's voice is often one among many in my life, as my enemy would drown it out. To whom can I listen with confidence? I am not sure. Is this really the voice of God? How do I know?
5. The problem also lies in the very relationship with God. He must mute his voice, he must hide behind the sinful exterior of a human being for my sin precludes the presence of God. I would be destroyed by that, so I am left to choose my prophet from a lineup and I am spiritually incompetent to make this choice on which so much depends.
6. Often times we preachers like to think that this is our word, and we struggle to make this message into our message. The result is that we are often too tied up with issues of success and failure. Like a quarterback, we get too much credit when it goes well and too much blame when it falls apart. It takes the whole team to succeed and fail.

Gospel

1. Christ has authority over all my foes. There is not one who does not have to own up to his lordship over all the creation and all that it contains. My friend, redeemer, and rescuer has the word which liberates and defends me.

2. My helplessness is not the issue, but it is in fact the pre-requisite. For the whole of his ministry the helpless will never be turned away from Jesus. It is the haughty and proud, the ones who will not see their need for a Savior who end up in conflict with him.
3. And so God, though my enemy has told me is distant and uncaring, has not in fact been so. Jesus has come, humbly and incarnate, but with flashes and glimpses of his real power and authority. He breaks the lies of the enemy who says that evil is the way it has always been and always will be, who says that we are supposed to die and we just get used to it. Jesus speaks a potent and authoritative word of life.
4. And in this ministry of Jesus, our Creator has not laid out some plan from afar which I must follow. He has sent me his only Son, whose word is potent and at whose command the demons flee. He has hidden his glory and power but not his love. That he has flagrantly and openly displayed in a cross borne and the gentle touch of Jesus and the continuing ministry of his people.
5. Yes, that peculiarly gentle and “hidden-God” revelation means I can miss the point, but it also means that the relationship of faith preserves for me the precious ability to say no to God, rendering faith and service meaningful and precious in his sight. The message spreads, Jesus forces no one but the demons. Our God’s great love is so great that he will not take that freedom from you.
6. And so the message we preach is God’s message, it isn’t ours. He takes the responsibility for the hearers and he will hold them accountable. This is not our message, but his – there is a great relief in that truth.

Sermon Ideas

1. What is this? A new teaching with authority? Even demons obey...” (Gospel: That the hearer would hear with joy that Jesus has authority to banish all our foes and exercises that authority today!)

Who is this? The stunned crowds of Capernaum ask one another this question when they see the good work that Jesus does in their midst. Today Jesus has spoken among us and today Jesus is working his good around the whole world. In the words of Absolution, He has assured us that our sins, and the pressures of the world, no matter how great they are, will surely not keep us from the love of God because God himself has banished them. Crises in family or finances, politics or anything else are no match for the authority of Christ.

In this reading, we see the Lord taking on our ancient foe, the tempter of Eden, the Demons whose power is on a wholly other plane than our own. At his word and presence they howl before him, they plead and they beg, and finally, reluctantly, they convulse the

man and flee from the presence of the one whom they cannot but obey. This is a battle none of us is prepared to fight, this is a war we of ourselves cannot win. We like to think that we have great powers with our technology, but our society hangs on the function of silicon chips and pulses of electricity. It is a tenuous power we hold, and it doesn't even touch what this man suffered from. Nuke a demon and he will bask in the heat of it, delighting in the misery which radioactive fallout brings to the innocent victims. Before such realities we are helpless, and were we alone in that fight, we would surely be lost to our foe. But long ago, in a humble place, in Capernaum on the shores of Galilee, God came, not in might and majesty, but the humble carpenter called Jesus. You would not have thought that this would work, but his word convulsed that demon and before the Holy One that demon had no choice but to flee. Take heart this day, Christ has the power you need, and more importantly, Christ incarnate in the flesh of humanity has expressed his love for you and his understanding of your plight. He is not only God, he is God for you!

Talk to a missionary sometime about spiritual and demonic forces. Our post-enlightenment world thinks these things are of the past or we want to say that these things are just mental illness or something like that. The missionaries will tell you that this is a very real thing, demons are not just a thing of the first century.

The modern is not really ready to talk about demons so much. It may not be what we want to do. But "forces" are something we are familiar with. We speak of economic forces, societal forces, environmental forces, forces of change, etc. These forces are impersonal but they are very real. They manipulate our world and make us feel helpless, in much the same way that in the first century people felt helpless before demons. I don't equate the demons and the economy, but both of them make me feel helpless. Society may want to define us as worthless and helpless before them. The baptismal, Eucharistic, and kerygmatic witness of worship is speaking a word against these forces.

2. And at once His fame spread... (Gospel - That the hearer, having experienced the love of the omnipotent God in Christ, in Sacrament, in Absolution, in the Fellowship of the saints would be excited and moved to join the Jesus movement which continues to sweep across this globe.)

We have said this before, the best sort of evangelism is not the telling of some ancient story or the recitation of someone else's tale, but the heartfelt and joyful telling of my own experience of this Jesus. Because he has created us to be in communion, because his gracious presence is always promised to the place where "two or three gather" we have occasion to preach the authority and presence of Christ in this gathering today. This morning as we gathered Jesus first dealt with our most pressing of needs. We confessed our sins, we acknowledged our weakness of every kind and he smiled upon us. His words were familiar but that makes them no less true. God forgave us in that moment, our ears heard it. And we were gathered not as a lonely sinner, but as a community. We turned to

the folk who sit next to us and everything changed. We were united not in our liking of each other but in the love of Christ, we belong somewhere, we are part of a vast family. We can travel the world over and we will find groups of folks who gather under a cross and though we don't know their language, they will also know this love and welcome us. But this is not the end the mystery of this day. When we kneel at this rail and we extend our hands, we receive not some token or symbol, but the very real body and blood of Christ. He comes here among us, he feeds the hungry here, he restores the weak and fainting. We did not have a demonic possession today, but that is more thanks to his preventative care than any failure on his part to cast them out. His cross and the baptism which united us to him in death is a mighty bulwark against the assaults off the Evil One. We are marked as "off limits" to him and he must not possess us unless we foolishly invite him in. Too often we have rushed through this morning and forgotten that the most important guest had holes in his hands and feet where he died for us. We have missed his teaching from this pulpit and we have missed his gracious acceptance of us in his forgiveness and at his table. Tempted to see the things which look powerful to us, we have found it easy to look at something else. Today I simply remind you of what awed the crowds so long ago, and which awes people even today.

That awe of years ago was the engine which drove the Jesus movement out of that synagogue and into the surrounding towns. That awe is what moves us out of this place, empowered by the gift of his Spirit, to tell of this love to a neighbor or a friend. Know your own Jesus story. Tell it, you too have seen the miracles and experienced the same Christ. Join the crowds of Capernaum and wonder aloud, tell the story.

3. The Prophet (OT and Gospel – that the Spirit of God would move the hearer to acknowledge the present authority of Christ, exercise it, and delight in it.)

A little different than the first sermon above, this message really focuses on the ways of God and his kingdom, especially as he authoritatively declares his kingdom and makes "his Kingdom come." I wonder what we think about when we pray that interesting phrase "thy kingdom come..." in the Lord's Prayer. The preacher might just want to review that section of the Small Catechism before he writes this sermon. It could give some really good ideas.

Many who pray "Thy Kingdom come" have a vision of the end of time and the glorious parousia of Christ. That is not inappropriate. But this day focuses our attention on another "appearance" of the kingdom of God: the Prophet. The OT text reminds us of the need for this kingdom to have a hidden nature. God in his glory is too much for the sinner to bear. God like that would strip us of any agency, it would make our obedience the obedience of a slave, not the obedience of faith to which the Bible enjoins us. The demon in the Gospel reading obeys, but it is not the obedience Christ seeks from his people. So God comes to us through means. We are familiar with this through sacraments which use bread and wine, water and words to convey the very love of God.

But God also uses people, indeed very ordinary, sometimes very flawed people, to announce his kingdom to this world. This sort of authority will make sense of reality. The world is often a very non-sensical place – but forgiveness allows us to see it in the sense of Christ. It is now the thing for which Jesus died. And of course, once, he used the very human incarnation of Himself to work the very salvation of the world. All of that is part of God's wise and loving way of dealing with his sinful creation. We often long for God to reveal his power, but that is really a foolish prayer in one sense. We could hardly bear it, and those who do not know Christ would be utterly destroyed by that appearance of God. So he waits for our sake and theirs.

The preacher will want to unpack the role of a prophet for the hearer. This is much misunderstood. We think prophets are all about telling the future. Hardly. Most of the prophetic task is to define the present. Few of us are given the vision of Isaiah to peer through the centuries and discern the salvation events as he does in chapter 53 of his work. But that only forms a small part of his book. Most of it is in the past tense, announcing to the people what God has done, has said, and is doing and is saying. He does not primarily foretell the future, but he defines the present, the here and now. The covenant of God made at Sinai is his primary text and he spends most of his time upbraiding faithless kings, encouraging dispirited people, and declaring that this event or that event is attributable to God.

I cannot tell the future, but I can, by the virtue of baptism and the indwelling of Christ and his Spirit tell much about the present. I can tell you that you are a child of God through baptism. I can tell you that God has forgiven your sins. I can tell you that you will be brought to heaven when you die. I am a prophet!

Now, of course, the Christ is The Prophet, but that does not end prophecy so much as it changes it, indeed empowers my prophetic work because it is all done in his name. All prophecy is now about him and through him. As a member of the Body of Christ, he dwells in me and lends me his authority when I speak. Indeed he promises that when I speak a word of forgiveness, it echoes with divine authority in heaven itself.

Moses saw a day when God would raise up another Prophet, The Prophet, to which all the world would listen. He would come from among us. Glory to God! He has done it, and more amazingly than we would ever have imagined. Not only is Jesus one of us, he is one with us, and now that prophetic office is carried out by every Christian for the sake of this world. Every second grader who forgives a playmate for the sake of Christ is a prophet of God's great and glorious kingdom! She has spoken God's sweet word, and God backs up her words with his own immeasurable authority.

We are not trying to give them a new job with this. but to let them see that this is what they are already doing.

Another important point for this comes from the OT. If the people don't listen to the prophet, God will require that of them. That is his worry, not yours. You might build this on the Jonah reading from last week. He was not a terribly motivated prophet, unless you consider that getting belched onto a beach by a giant fish is a fine motivator. He seems to have been a most reluctant prophet. Yet, he did it.