

Epiphany 4, January 31, 2021 (Mk 1:21-28; Ps 111; Dt 18:15-20) **Sermon**

The holy gospel according to Mark, the 1st chapter (1:21-28)

Jesus and the 4 disciples he called in last week's gospel **went to Capernaum** (on the shore of the Sea of Galilee), **and when the sabbath came, Jesus went into the synagogue and began to teach.** (It was tradition for a visiting Jewish adult man to be handed the scroll of the day and then speak about it.) **The people were amazed at his teaching, because he taught them as one who had authority, not as the teachers of the law. Just then a man in their synagogue who was possessed by an evil spirit cried out, "What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are—the Holy One of God!"**

"Be quiet!" said Jesus sternly. "Come out of him!" The evil spirit shook the man violently and came out of him with a shriek. The people were all so amazed that they asked each other, "What is this? A new teaching—and with authority! He commands even the evil spirits and they obey him." News about him spread quickly over the whole region of Galilee.

Steve Garnaas-Holmes writes about this text: *Yes, he has come to destroy them, the demonic forces that wreck people. Do not doubt that he has come to cast them out, all of them. Not merely to touch individuals but to disarm evil itself, to reclaim all creation.*

He has come to cast out demonic spirits of injustice that dehumanize, that possess people. Demonic spirits that bind us and blind us with hate and hard-heartedness that diminish others. Demons of fear and self-protection. He has come to do away with them. He is not afraid of the loud voices, the convulsions they will cause. He has called all his beloved to share in the baptism of his power. He comes with authority. For this love has the Power to overcome evil.

*O Mighty One, Loving One, Powerful Lord, cast out my demons, my fear and inadequacy, and fill me with your Spirit instead. Fill me with the power to resist evil, to set free from the grip of the demonic what is human, what is fragile and beautiful, what is yours (Steve Garnaas-Holmes, *Unfolding Light*, January 30, 2015). (end of quote)*

Fifteen hundred years before the time of Jesus, Moses promised the chosen people that God would raise up for them a prophet like himself.

For the next 1250 years God did indeed provide prophets for Israel: Elijah and his successor Elisha; the “major prophets” Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel; and twelve “minor prophets” whose names might not be so familiar to you.

Each one of them spoke the Word of the Lord to the chosen people. The task of the prophet was—and *is* today—to speak God’s truth, to comfort the afflicted, and to afflict the comfortable.

Mostly the Old Testament prophets were sent to proclaim God’s word to the leaders of the nation. The task of the prophets was to hold kings and religious leaders, as well as the people under their rule, accountable to the God of the Exodus. The content of the prophetic message was *God’s justice, righteousness, and steadfast love for all people*. You remember who “all” is, right? The last, the least, the little, the lonely, the lost; the widow, the orphan, and stranger in our midst.

Then, about 250 years before Christ, the prophets seemed to melt away. The Word of the Lord was no longer heard in Israel. The chosen people wondered if God had abandoned them. Why was God silent? Where had all the prophets gone?

And then there came a man to Galilee. **The time has come, he said. The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!**

Followed by four fishermen, he came to Capernaum, **and when the Sabbath came, he went into the synagogue and began to teach. The people were amazed at his teaching, because he taught them as one who had authority.** -- Could this stranger perhaps be a prophet?

Just then a man in their synagogue who was possessed by evil spirits cried out, “What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us?”

Listen again to the words from Pastor Steve Garnaas-Holmes: *Yes, he has come to destroy them, the demonic forces that wreck people.*

What are the demonic forces in your life today? Jesus has come to destroy them!

Do you live with guilt or shame? Jesus, God-in-the-flesh, died to take away your sin. He died to show you how much God loves you, to convince you that even though you participate in his crucifixion by sinning, God's love is stronger than your wickedness.

Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.

Do you live with broken relationships? Do you feel abandoned or rejected by those who used to love you, who *should* love you? Or do you withhold love from those you used to love, those you *should* love? Jesus, God-in-the-flesh, died to show you how to forgive.

Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.

Do you live with unstoppable desires, uncontrollable feelings, addictions to substances or actions? Do you live with inconsolable grief? Jesus, God-in-the-flesh, said, **Come to me, all who are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.**

Do you live with insecurity or feelings of worthlessness? **God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not *perish*, but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send his Son into the world to *condemn* the world, but in order that the world might be *saved* through him.**

Do you live with illness or injury that can't be cured? Do you live in fear of death? Do you live in poverty? Do you live with persecution or prejudice? Listen to Paul in his letter to the Romans:

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or peril or sword? . . . No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, nor angels nor demons, nor things present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 8:35, 37-39).

Mark wrote, **Just then a man in their synagogue who was possessed by an evil spirit cried out, "What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us?"**

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If we're honest, we must confess that we're all possessed—by jealousies, pride, unhealthy life styles, useless worries, spirits unforgiving toward ourselves or others.

Jesus has come to destroy those things that possess us. When we were baptized into his death, we were sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked with the cross of Christ forever. We belong to him, from now until the end of time.

When we receive, in just a few minutes, his body and blood, we again become one with him and with each other, and with all people throughout time and space who belong to him.

The forgiveness he spoke on the cross fills us with divine love, empowering us to live as he lived so that we may die as he died, secure in the sure and certain hope of resurrection to life everlasting.

I end with the closing words of Pastor Steve Garnaas-Holmes: *O Mighty One, Loving One, Powerful Lord, cast out my demons, my fear and inadequacy, and fill me with your Spirit instead. Fill me with the power to resist evil, to set free from the grip of the demonic what is human, what is fragile and beautiful, what is yours.*

In the holy name of Jesus, Amen.