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The Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany (Series B)  
February 1, 2015  
Text: Mark 1:21–28

Grace be to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Last week, I made the claim that the Epiphany season keeps us grounded in the absolute necessities of our most holy faith. A week ago, that essential teaching came in the preaching of Jesus, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe the gospel” (Mk. 1:15). I summarized our Lord’s preaching as repentance and faith.

This week’s essential teaching proves to be even more dramatic, maybe even uncannily bizarre. It centers on the question of authority. The concept of authority has fallen upon hard times these days. People mistakenly equate authority with tyranny or oppression. Nothing could be further from the truth. Authority is simply the legitimate exercise of bestowed power and ability for the good of those existing under that authority’s jurisdiction.

The Lord Jesus must answer the question of authority. Last Sunday, we read how Jesus began preaching repentance and faith and then called men to follow him as disciples. By what authority does He do these things? Preach in God’s name and act with the authority of a master worthy of calling disciples. In today’s Gospel reading, Jesus taught in the synagogue of Capernaum. The people were astonished because Jesus “taught them as one who had authority” (vs. 22). And then, a demon creates a most embarrassing scene during the worship service. Jesus rebukes the devil and sends him packing. And the people were amazed at His authority to even command the demons! And they obey (vs. 27)!

Who is this man with such authority? His teaching is unlike any heard before. He commands the demons and they obey.

The answer to that question begins to found in the OT reading from Deuteronomy 18. After 40 years of wandering in the dessert, the people of Israel are on the cusp of entering into the Promised Land. Moses, that prophet of God, is preparing the people for life in the land promised centuries earlier to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Vs. 15,

18, “<sup>15</sup>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... <sup>18</sup>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.”

Moses provided the template to knowing who the Messiah would be. He will be like Moses, called of God, empowered by God, authorized by God to perform His signs and wonders. This Messiah will speak the very words of God. For the Father will place them in His mouth to speak.

The Lord is this prophet. The people were astonished at his teaching because Jesus brings the Father’s word and will to them with all the authority and power of the Father. In a glorious and mysterious way, Jesus possessed an internal and essential authority that no other prophet, preacher, or teacher could have. Jesus didn’t need to cite other authorities. He was THE authority, established by the Father.

How different the Lord’s teaching must have sounded to the people. The scribes would typically proclaim their teaching while citing other teachers as their authority. You know how this works for we still do it today. A professor publishes a paper and he cites all the other authorities he used to come to his or her conclusions. These people made this or that conclusion and they have multiple diplomas from various institutions of higher education. And based upon their findings and my additional findings – and I have these credentials from this and that place – this is what I say about whatever topic.

But Jesus does none of this. He doesn’t provide a bibliography. He doesn’t refer to any other source of authority except for His own and the inscripturated Word of God. And the people were amazed.

Mark doesn’t give us the content of Jesus’ sermon. In all likelihood, Jesus is preaching the same kind of message Mark described in 1:14, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.” Repentance and faith. And the congregation is astonished!

When was the last time you were amazed at Jesus’ teaching? Or to put the question in terms of the catechism: Do you hold God’s Word sacred and gladly hear and learn it? It’s so easy for us to become desensitized to the authority and amazement of God’s Word. The devil, the world, and our sinful flesh do not want us to hallow God’s name

or let His kingdom come. And one very sinister way in which that happens is sheer boredom with God's Word.

Today, I call you to respond to God's Word like the psalmist in today's psalm (111), "Great are the works of the Lord, studied by all who delight in them" (vs. 2) and "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom; all those who practice it have a good understanding" (vs. 10). With a repentant heart and mind, we hear God's Word anew and find delight in it.

With the authority of God the Father and empowered the Holy Spirit, Christ, the Son of God, declares condemned sinners to be released from the bondage of their sins, not only on the resurrection of the Last Day but now. Jesus declares death to be a defeated enemy that we need not fear. Jesus proclaims that His kingdom is so close at hand that we sinners can be born into it through faith and baptismal waters. According to Jesus, God's love is so intense for His people that He dies and rises from the dead for them. Jesus speaks to you and me saying that He wants to be so close to us that He willingly gives His holy body and blood to eat and drink for the forgiveness of our sins. He wants to be so close to us that He fills us with His Holy Spirit. And in this time between His resurrection and His second coming, Jesus is busily preparing a place for each of us in His heavenly kingdom. These are the works of God, studied by all who delight in them.

The congregation of Capernaum listens to the Lord Jesus in sheer amazement. But there is one person who does not share the congregation's wonder and awe. In fact, He's scared out of his mind. He knows who Jesus is. He's dealt with Him before; long ago when the world was still new and fresh. And when his terror could no longer be contained, an evil spirit cries out in desperation, "What do 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!" (vs. 24).

Isn't that amazing! A demon knows who Jesus is and he find it anything but boring or ho-hum. This unclean spirit is overcome by the teaching authority of Jesus. Sadly, he hates it. And if he could, he would destroy Jesus' teaching. But in the presence of Jesus, this demon must speak the truth. Jesus is the "Holy One of God" (vs. 24).

But not all true statements are made with godly intentions. This demon's goal, even while trembling at Jesus' face, was to separate people's faith in the Messiah from His saving actions to be accomplished on Calvary. The time of our Lord's passion and

death was not yet. Knowing this, our Lord responds with authority, “Be silent, and come out of him!” (vs. 25) And like a spoiled 2-year old throwing a tantrum, the demon convulses the man and obeys Jesus’ command. Yes, Jesus is Lord over Satan and hell too; Jesus possesses and exercises authority over that spiritual realm too.

Two times Mark records the people being amazed. One for Jesus’ teaching authority, the other for His authority over demons. Jesus doesn’t give a nice-sounding, therapeutic sermon. He speaks and what He says happens for His Word is living, powerful, active. In other words, Jesus’ word and presence are authoritative!

Sounds great doesn’t it?! The authority and presence of Jesus are found in this worship service because His Word is here. But I must caution you. Jesus is the one with the authority. He does wondrous things we can’t control. Like notorious sinners being forgiven, like demon possessed people being set free from their demonic oppression. Those kinds of things can be unsettling.

And there something else we need to know about Christ’s authoritative word. Not everyone was glad to hear it. In vs. 27 it says they (the people in the synagoge at Capernaum) were amazed, “so that they questioned among themselves.” Some like what they heard, others did not. If you want a nice and safe worship service or a religion that doesn’t disturb you or anyone else, then by all means, don’t preach Jesus and His authoritative Word. The religious life at Capernaum was nice and safe, even the demons went to church, at least until Jesus came to town.

But if you want a holy Savior who loves you with all the authority of God the Father, if you want a divine King, a Holy Spirit giving Savior, a Lord foretold in ancient Scriptures, if you want a God that calls you unto Himself in the joy of forgiveness and the beauty of holiness, then Jesus is the One for you. And by God’s grace and with your prayers, Jesus will be preached among us in all His authority and wonder.

✠ In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. ✠ Amen.

Now the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.