

4 Epiphany - Year B – January 29, 2012
Deuteronomy 18:15-20; Psalm 111; 1 Corinthians 8:1-13; Mark 1:21-28
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I always consider it a great privilege to see democracy in action. As the race for the GOP party nomination continues, there's no doubt in my mind that we live in interesting times! There's a tremendous amount of information and misinformation out there, especially in the media, and on social networking, like Twitter and Facebook. While we might be somewhat distracted by the events on the political campaign trail, it's extremely refreshing to have such a great reading from the Gospel of Mark this morning. Here's Jesus, fresh from His wilderness experience and the calling of the first disciples, beginning His "kingdom campaign". Despite our politicians' attempts to weigh in at each of their debates with authority, they don't seem to have anything new to teach us. Unlike Jesus, their fame seems to be spreading for much more dubious reasons!

I'm delighted that this morning we have the awesome privilege of hearing and seeing God in action through the Word made flesh, Jesus Christ. One of the purposes of the Gospel of Mark is to invite us to participate with Jesus' first disciples in the growing awareness and recognition of His identity as God's Son, our Savior and Lord. Today's Gospel lesson confronts us with the question on the lips of all in that ancient synagogue, "What is this?" The reading opens the door for fresh perceptions and new insights. Yet the answer will always come down to a decision of faith concerning the person of Jesus Christ, and whether or not we want to open the door of our hearts to an authentic relationship with Him. Let's join the crowd in the synagogue and experience Jesus' teaching and healing together.

A quick review of Mark's telling of the events is in order. It's the Sabbath and Jesus and His disciples are at the synagogue in Capernaum. Jesus is teaching. There are no details on what He says, other than a shrewd comparison with the teaching of the Scribes. In that respect, Jesus teaches as one who, probably despite appearances, apparently has the divinely inspired right to interpret the Scriptures. That is really the essence of the word "authority" here. Quite suddenly, it becomes apparent that amongst the crowd in the synagogue is a man with an unclean spirit. This is where it gets really interesting. Presumably, the man was a regular at worship services, and yet none of the preaching and teaching he's heard in the past has ever disturbed that hostile spirit dwelling within him. This possessed man is considered unclean, because the spiritual forces dwelling in him are essentially hostile to God. Jesus speaks words that produce healing actions. The unclean spirit immediately shouts out. The crowd also responds. A buzz of excitement spreads in the synagogue, and throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.

This encounter is amazing. As we experience it again, we too can participate with the rest of the newly enlivened crowd, and express our own astonishment at Jesus' authority. "What is this?" The possessed man is sick, dis-eased in spirit, if not also in body and mind, and he needs help. Jesus' teaching liberates him. Jesus shows us the kingdom of God in healing the man, freeing him for right relationship with God, and restoration with his community of faith. The power of Jesus' words as *the* Word, brings new life and passion to the whole congregation. The Word of God disrupts the previously undisturbed presence of a force that is hostile to God. This revelation of the power of God, invites us to reflect on how the word of God has disturbed our own dis-ease. Or maybe it reveals to us, how we've resisted the power of God's word to heal us, perhaps because we're afraid, or really don't want to change. Many forces in the world can, and do, silently take up residence in our hearts or minds. It's anything or anyone that distracts us from focusing on Jesus, who is our rock and our refuge, our Savior and redeemer, as well as our strength and our hope. Our dis-ease is anything or anyone that consumes or possesses us, be it constant anxiety, money, drugs, alcohol, addictions, or all kinds of things that form a barrier between us, and our relationship with God in Christ Jesus.

Good News is always welcome and enlivening. Today's Gospel reading has the best news we can

ever receive. God is still present in the world through His teaching and the Word that heals. Today – this moment – the Lord is inviting us to open the door to those dim and darkened rooms where we’ve been hiding from the Light of life. The Lord desires that we welcome the outpouring of God’s love, washing over those cold rocky spots in our hearts and minds, blessing us with healing in the waters of new and unending life. Here’s more Good News. The man in the story is suffering silently and unnoticed by the crowd until something in the Lord’s word brings him to new life and healing. One of the greatest gifts of today’s Gospel reading is that we participate in Christ’s healing Word each time we worship, study the Scriptures, and hear God’s Word with the ears of faith. We also share in the gift of the Holy Spirit by virtue of our baptism. As Christ’s Body, we too are empowered agents of God’s “kingdom campaign”. A significant facet of our mission as Christ’s disciples is to offer salvation in His name, meaning that we are also sharing the gift of healing with the deeply troubled people of the world.

“What is this?” we ask. Jesus Christ, the life and light of the world renews and refreshes us, because His word produces healing actions, and a healing response within us. In this story, we see how Jesus is fulfilling His mission, and showing us the way to fulfill our own mission by caring for the poor in spirit, and healing the sick. Jesus silences the unclean spirit because the spirit recognizes Him and expresses belief and fear. Unlike those who hear and respond in faith, there is no trust here. The evil spirits immediately assume that Jesus has come to destroy them. On the other hand, authentic faith recognizes and responds to Jesus as the life-giving teacher and healer. Our faith is best expressed through trust and commitment in relationship with God in Christ Jesus, and with one another.

The healing words from the Word made flesh, just like His words of teaching, are revealed in us when we reflect God’s will in our lives, and God’s characteristic concern for His people. Jesus’ words and deeds illumine the shape of God’s kingdom. He shows us how we too can create a life-changing response from those who are indifferent, distracted, or suffering in silence. Our ministry in Christ’s name also serves God’s purpose to bring the Good News of Jesus Christ to others. As we tell our own stories of healing, or any of a number of amazing ways that Jesus has changed our lives, it may seem like we’re just sharing information. However, by the power of the Holy Spirit, what’s really happening is transformation. In the myriad of ways that we show our love of God and love of neighbor, we’re experiencing **and** inviting others to join us in the journey of transforming faith.

Today is our Annual Parish Meeting. Much of what we’ll hear and see is not just information, but steps on the road of our continuing journey of transformation as a community of faith. Please pray with me now. Lord God, by the power of the Holy Spirit keep our hearts ever open to your will, guide us in your ways, and reveal your purpose for our lives, and the life of this community of faith. In Jesus’ Name we pray.

Amen.