

The Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany – Year B, RCL January 28, 2018

Deuteronomy 18:15-20

1 Corinthians 8:1-13

Mark 1:21-28

Psalm 111

A sermon preached by the Rev. Susan Pinkerton
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(Annual Meeting)

What Possesses Us Today?

A woman was quite religious and she traveled a great deal for her job. This meant flying which made her very nervous. She got into the habit of bringing her Bible along and reading it during the long flights. It brought her a great deal comfort and relaxed her a bit. On one trip a gentleman sitting next to her noticed she was reading the Bible. With a smirk on his face he finally asked the woman, “You don’t really believe all that stuff in there do you?” She said, “Yes, of course I do. It is in the Bible.” She continued reading. The man said, “What about the guy who was swallowed by the whale?” “Oh, Jonah. Yes, I believe that, it is in the Bible.” He asked, “Well how do you suppose he survived all that time inside the whale?” The lady said, “Well, I don’t know. I guess when I get to heaven I will ask him.” What if he isn’t in heaven?” the man asked sarcastically. “Then you can ask him,” replied the lady.

I think it safe to say none of us have all the answers to the vast array of complexities life throws our way. In fact, the older I get I find I have far fewer answers and whole lot more questions. In this opening story the woman claimed knowledge of Scripture as her authority and the man claimed his life experience. We need both. This morning we witness how Jesus asserts his authority over both the spiritual world and the Word of God.

Mark gives us a fascinating glimpse into Jesus’ world as he begins his public ministry, going to the local synagogue on the Sabbath for worship as was his custom. It is in this familiar and holy surrounding that Jesus reveals who he is to the world. This is big news! From the very beginning Jesus, as God Incarnate, claims his authority over both the spiritual realm and the knowledge of sacred Scripture. And, he does it in such a way that everyone, even the most skeptical of the revered scholars, are astounded with their mouths hanging open, scratching their heads and wondering who is this person that speaks with such power and authority. He is like someone not of this world – and they are right.

David Lose, pastor and theologian, reminds us that “Jesus has come to oppose all the forces that keeps us from the abundant life God desires for all of us. God wants the

most for us from this life and stands in opposition to anything that robs us of the joy and community and purpose for which we were created.”¹

This year we will journey along with Mark’s gospel and discover how God’s only Son, the Messiah, breaks through barriers, challenges and confronts any kind of authority, person, system or convention that would threaten his mission of sharing the Good News that God is here and dwells amongst us, Emmanuel.

The moment Jesus reveals his true self he is immediately confronted with a man who is possessed by an “unclean spirit.” Unlike those who witnessed Jesus’ teaching just moments ago, this evil spirit seems to know exactly who Jesus is. “I know who you are, the Holy One of God.”

The “unclean spirit” that confronts Jesus is clearly an evil force of some kind, the dark, empty places in our world, in our lives and beyond that appear godless and without any hope of redemption.² Jesus wastes no time calling and casting out the evil that has possessed this poor soul. He claims his authority over all that is seen and unseen in all of creation, including all that threatens to rob this man of the full and abundant life God promises as God’s beloved.

And, it is just as true today as it was when Jesus entered that synagogue in Capernaum so long ago. Jesus continues to show up in our lives, often when we least expect it but when we need God the most. Whatever it is that possesses and wounds us; our fear or anxiety over work, our health or finances; feeling defeated and depressed with the current state of our nation and the world; fighting an addiction of some sort or simply feeling exhausted and depleted from the constant demands, uncertainties and vagaries of life. Whatever it may be that takes possession of us and robs us from being fully alive, we take great solace in knowing that God is near, nearer than our own breath. We know that somehow God is powerful to hold it all.

If God is willing to suffer, hanging from a cross and die a humiliating death out of love for you and me, surely God will be with us in the muck and mire of our own lives. This is where we place our hope and our trust; in a loving God that will meet us in our brokenness and will not abandon us when we are most vulnerable and most in need of God’s compassionate love and healing touch.

My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think that I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road, though I may know nothing about it. Therefore, will I trust you always, though I may seem to be lost and in the

¹ David Lose, <http://www.davidlose.net/2015/01/epiphany-4-b/>, last accessed on Jan. 26, 2018.

^A Lewis, <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=3511>, last accessed on Jan. 26, 2018.

shadow of death. I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone.

Thomas Merton

Amen.