

Epiphany 4B. January 28, 2018. Dungeness Valley Lutheran Church, Sequim, WA. Psalm 111, I Corinthians 8:1-13, Mark 1:21-28. “Notes for a young scribe”.

Mark 1: 21 They went to Capernaum; and when the sabbath came, [Jesus] entered the synagogue and taught. 22They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes. 23Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, 24and he cried out, ‘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.’ 25But Jesus rebuked him, saying, ‘Be silent, and come out of him!’ 26And the unclean spirit, throwing him into convulsions and crying with a loud voice, came out of him. 27They were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, ‘What is this? A new teaching—with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him.’ 28At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.

The young scribe, we’ll call him Amos, stood at the fringe of the gathering in the synagogue. He craned his neck, over and around his colleagues, and concentrated intently, trying to hear every word the man from Nazareth was saying. Repent. Believe. The Kingdom of God is near. The Kin-dom of God is among you.

The man taught with such intensity that Amos was transfixed. Then the crazy man of Capernaum showed up. It was the Sabbath when no one was willing to physically restrain him. During the week they would throw him out, but on the Sabbath – what could they do?

He went right up to the teacher from Nazareth, making his usual racket. He sputtered out words like “holy one” and “destroy”. He even called the teacher by name. There was power in the disrupter today – because if you can name someone or something, you have a power advantage.

The teacher didn’t even stand up. “Be silent!” he commanded. “Be healed!”

And the poor man fell to the floor. It was terrible. He thrashed around and screamed all the louder. Amos would never forget it.

It was the Sabbath and no one would touch the man. When he came to rest. Jesus went on with his teaching. Repent. Believe. The Kin-dom of God is at hand.

Maybe, thought Amos, this man from Nazareth – of all places – was like the prophets of old who held up the holy laws of Moses. This man cut right to the

chase – he didn't haggle over little aspects of the law, nor discuss the unclean spirits that had taken over the troubled man's life. He simply commanded them to leave and they did.

Now that's authority with power, a holy authority that wills good for us. How many long years had that poor man plagued us with his outbursts! How impossible it was for him to work, to live among his family, to have a friend! We had no power, no authority over the spirits that tormented him.

This Jesus of Nazareth is different. The prophetic voice is not silent.

Perhaps it was here all along, but we didn't hear it? Perhaps we have forgotten the mighty acts of God that old king David recounted in the psalms we pray. Perhaps we have not believed that God is still with us today.

Certainly the power, the authority, and the message seem to fit. Repent of sins: personal, communal, societal. Believe, the kin-dom of God is at hand.

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Today's story is more than teaching and healing. It signifies the cosmic conflict between brokenness and wholeness, between societal sins and communal solutions, between small-mindedness and openness to God's will.

And so it goes. Each person. Each generation. Each congregation. Each one of us has the chance to be engaged by the prophetic voice of God. Do we hear it? Can we take it? Or would we rather be bound by small ways, small laws, small faith like the scribes in that assembly long ago?

Through the words that we hear each week in worship, at study, in conversation, and in prayer, God seeks again and again to reach us as a holy authority outside ourselves that wills us good.

People just like us have heard the voice of God through prophets and have ignored, or stifled, or crucified it. We can be tempted to reject uncomfortable words of truth, especially when they convict us – of failing to care for men like the sick man of Capernaum, of failing to demand justice of our government, of ignoring the children who need to hear about Jesus, of forgetting our elders and their needs for hand-holding or foot-washing or gentle presence.

We who have homes can be tempted to overlook people experiencing homelessness. We who have heat, air conditioning, cars, plane travel, plentiful

food can be tempted to overlook the climate change that will make wet places wetter, dry places drier, erode farm land and coastal land in the poorest places of the world. We who know everyone's name at coffee hour can be tempted to forget the experience we once had when we knew no one's name and were perhaps shy to mix in.

We can seduce our prophets into speaking words that comfort when words of judgment are needed. We can silence prophetic words in our midst.

What happened for Amos and the sick man and those listening to Jesus in the Capernaum synagogue can happen for you and me in the 21st century as well. Jesus looked at the sick man and healed him. He looked around at Amos and the other scribes as if to say, do you see it? Do you see the power of my authority? And, as he often did in other stories of healing, Jesus spoke the words Amos, the man-made-whole, the other scribes, and you and I need to hear. Repent! And believe that I forgive you.

Repent. And believe that God forgives you.

Now I invite you: get up, go about your business, live your vocation and do not forget the justice I desire. Do not forget the woman, the man, the child falling through the cracks. Do not ignore the man outside your circle. Do not ignore the poorest people of the world who will suffer most from climate change. Do not fail the person who is different from you, who struggles with demons you cannot even imagine, who needs the encouraging word, the acceptance that YOU have available to give!

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The early church – like all congregations – was plagued with its own set of demons. In today's second lesson we see the struggle between the authority of God and the worship of idols. Part of that worship – how obscure it sounds to us today! – involved offering meat in temples dedicated to various gods. The priests of that temple would either eat or sell the roasted barbecue and people would buy that meat, take it home, and eat it. First century "fast food."

Some Christians came to realize the "fast food" meat was pretty good. And even though they didn't worship the god on whose altar it had been roasted, they bought and consumed it. Other Christians said, "You shouldn't have anything to DO with that stuff. Keep yourself pure!"

So what's a pastor to do when there are two such conflicting opinions in the congregation – both arguably valid? Paul teaches: there's nothing wrong with eating that meat – in and of itself. Paul is also patient and willing to stop eating meat for a while if that will help those who do not yet understand his teaching. Sort of like a pastor who longs for a rock band in church to attract the children and young people of her town, but who waits patiently – still teaching -- utilizing traditional music and hymns -- until her congregation is ready to look at ways to reach out to the unchurched.

Love and patience enable very different people to experience community in Christ. Love does not avoid conflict, however. Paul keeps teaching – with authority – about the idol-roasted meat; he keeps addressing moral issues of his day, as does our church, the ELCA, today. And he asks that every member of the community be taken seriously – weak or strong, with or without authority or wisdom – for each is an individual loved by God and cherished by Jesus.

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For some of you, the time between a long-serving pastor and a new to-be-called pastor, feels like a time to keep things going as you always did; for others this transition time feels like a time to try new things. Like Amos, we seek authentic authority—not fleeting political or churchly trends, not so-called fake news, not pop culture, nor promises of wealth too good to be true.

The answer to the challenges faced by the church, the congregation, the individual in confusing times – is the same answer God delivered to the people of Capernaum and Corinth. It's what Luther said had to be at the center of every sermon, every household, every heart and every community: it's the person of the One Who teaches with authority, with the God-given holy authority outside of ourselves who wills us good.

It's Christ Jesus -- crucified for his words and deeds of power and authority, but never stopped. Raised and alive for us today, to grace our worship, our conversation, our deliberations -- with his own healing words to the powers and spirits that could convulse us, disrupt our community, or drive our consciences to despair. "Be silent – and come out of him." Jesus looks you and me in the eye and says, "Repent. The kin-dom of God is here." And hear the words I said so often while I walked the earth, "I love and forgive you."

Hallelujah! Give thanks to the Lord with your whole heart. Amen.