

Epiphany 4 / January 31, 2021

Mark 1:24

“I know who you are: The Holy One of God.”

Do you have a special place and time to pray and read scripture? Our gospel takes place in a synagogue in Capernaum on the Sabbath. For devout Jews of the first century, no day was more important than the Sabbath for worship. No place was more important than the synagogue as a place to worship, pray and study the scriptures. The temple was the most important place in terms of their faith, but the temple was far away for Jews in the dispersion and for Jews who lived in Galilee and parts of Judea, distant from Jerusalem. Sacrifices were offered in the temple for forgiveness and as acts of worship, but the synagogue was a place in which the local community gathered each week.

The glory of the Lord dwelt in the temple in a special way. The temple embodied the Lord's presence among His people. Devout Jews were required by law to worship at the temple four times in the course of a year, to keep the major festivals. Some worshiped in the temple more often. Some like Anna in the gospel of Luke, never left the temple, “worshipping with fasting and prayer night and day.” But for most Jews, the local synagogue was the primary place of worship, as they gathered there weekly for fellowship, prayer and teaching.

Much of Jesus ministry took place in the synagogues of Galilee and Judea. Jesus healed the sick, restored sight to the blind and gave wholeness of body to the disabled, in synagogues on the Sabbath. Jesus worshipped regularly in synagogues on the Sabbath. He revealed Himself as the Messiah in the synagogue of His hometown on a Sabbath. Jesus revealed Himself as the Messiah and the Son of God, in synagogues on the Sabbath as He taught the sacred scriptures.

In our gospel Jesus teaches in the synagogue at Capernaum. His words leave the people astonished. He teaches differently than their scribes and synagogue leaders. He teaches with authority! His words exude power and are the first clue that reveals His divine glory. Jesus' words reveal His true nature. They show Him to be the Holy One of God, who has come to destroy the work of the devil and restore the human spirit to a right relationship with God, through the forgiveness of His cross. His words reveal Him as our God and Saviour!

According to Mark, it was Jesus' teaching that first caught people's attention. His teaching was different from their teachers. They described it as “a new teaching.” His teaching made an impression that suggested there was more to Him than met the eye. His words showed there was something different about Him, but they couldn't quite put their finger on it! But there was someone in the synagogue that day who could! A man with an unclean spirit heard His words, saw who He was and immediately 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.” What an amazing thing! The worshippers can't put their finger on it, but the unclean spirit knows immediately who Jesus is and what He has come to do. How does it know? He knows, because Jesus teaches the scriptures in truth and purity and in them reveals Himself as the Holy One of God. We see Jesus in the word and know Him as the Holy One of God, our Saviour!

Think about this. The unclean spirit sees Jesus in the scriptures, before anyone else. The people were strangely amazed when Jesus spoke, but the unclean spirit immediately recognized Him as the “Holy One of God.” It sounds odd, but no one knows more about scripture and how to twist it, than the devil and the unclean spirits. Consider the success the devil had tempting Adam and Eve, by twisting God's word. They had God's pure, plain word and even though they were without sin, the devil deceived them, simply by asking them, “Did God really say?” All they had to say was “Yes that's just what He said,” but they didn't! God had revealed Himself in His word, but in the moment of temptation, they closed their ears and listened to the devil. To withstand the temptation of the devil, we need to know God's word and see Jesus in the word!

In the wilderness, the devil tempted Jesus using the same method, by quoting scripture and twisting it to his purpose. He took Him to a high place and told Him to prove that He was indeed the Son of God, by casting Himself down. After all it is written, “He will command His angels concerning you and on their hands they will bear you up, lest you strike your foot against a stone.” He had no success with Jesus, because no one knows scripture better than the Holy One of God.

Jesus said, "It is written, you shall not put the Lord your God to the test." Jesus shows Himself the Holy One of God through His word. It's shocking that the worshippers in that and other synagogues couldn't identify Jesus through His word; while a man with an unclean spirit heard it, loud and clear. It shows how important it is for us to know the word and see Jesus in the word. Jesus told the teachers of the law, "You search the scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness to me." In Scripture, Jesus reveals Himself as the Holy One of God, our Saviour!

Jesus came with what seemed to them, "a new teaching." What was this new teaching? It was simply the gospel of God's love in forgiveness, breaking fresh into the world through the person of Jesus. It was new, because they had forgotten it! It was new, because the devil had led them away from faith in the gospel and bound them to obedience to the law. When Jesus announced His Messiahship in the synagogue at Nazareth He said, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because He has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour." Jesus was anointed to teach the gospel of God' love in mercy and forgiveness! It seemed like a new teaching, because they had closed their ears to the gospel and listened only to the law of commands. It was a teaching older than the law. Long before God gave the law through Moses, He proclaimed the gospel, by promising a redeemer to undo the sin of Adam and destroy the devil and his works. Jesus is the redeemer!

In Old Testament times the devil did his work, by leading Israel away from the Lord to worship false idols. God sent Israel into exile in Assyria and Babylon, to cleanse them of the sin of worshipping false gods. They returned to the Promised Land cleansed of that form of idolatry. In first century Palestine, the devil did his work by leading Israel away from the gospel of God's love and forgiveness by tempting them to seek Him in obedience to the law of commands, customs and ordinances. They committed idolatry with their works in obedience to the law.

The devil is an expert both in human nature and scripture. He even uses God's law to lead people away from God, so we worship our good works instead of Him! He knows the law is written on the human heart. He uses that sense of right and wrong to lead us to seek a relationship with God based on our obedience to law rather than on God's love. It worked in the past in ancient Israel and it still works in the Church today!

Jesus entered the synagogues where the devil led people to seek relationship with God based on their obedience to the law, and told people the gospel of God's love in mercy and forgiveness. People thought it was a new teaching! The evil spirit knew it was the very nature of God. It was annoyed. It demanded to know what business He had interfering with the devil's affairs. We are just as vulnerable to the same temptation to live with God in terms of our obedience, our goodness, our good works. The same law is written on our hearts. We are just as vulnerable to base our relationship with God on our goodness, rather than on God's grace in Christ Jesus. The devil has his way when we seek relationship with God based on our obedience to the law.

We need to remember that Jesus came to give us a relationship with God based on the forgiveness of sin; forgiveness He would earn through His obedience to the law and sacrificial death, to pay our debt of sin. Jesus proclaims the good news of forgiveness to the poor in spirit. He releases from captivity those bound in chains of sin He pardons those under the condemnation of death. In His words He shows Himself to be the Holy One of God, our Saviour and dearest friend.

The unclean spirit recognized Jesus in His word and trembled. It trembled, because it feared Jesus had come to destroy them. It had good reason to be afraid. Jesus came to destroy the devil and all his works. Jesus destroyed the devil's work by shedding His blood on the cross, to make payment for our sins. Jesus destroys the work of the devil in us, by drowning the evil in our spirits through the water of our baptism into His death and resurrection. We recognize Jesus in His word and rejoice!

Whenever the devil tempts us to sin, we return to the promise Jesus spoke in our baptism and drown the unclean spirit in the water of repentance. As often as the unclean spirit arises within us and we sin, we return to Jesus' words of forgiveness. We know Jesus in His word. He is the Holy One of God. He speaks to us as our Saviour, healer and dearest friend. God bless us always with ears to hear and hearts to believe. In Jesus' Name. Amen.