

The Authoritative Word

The Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany (29 January 2012)
Saint Mark 1:21-28

Dearly beloved, in a letter to Saint Timothy, the Apostle Paul once wrote:

“Preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching. The time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths.” [2 Timothy 4:2-4]

There is no shortage of itching ears in our day and age. And there is no shortage of pastors who are eager to scratch those itching ears. Walk into the average church or turn on almost any religious programing and you will most likely hear the pastor...

- talk about himself,
- tell a few jokes,
- avoid any talk of sin and its consequences,
- speak of Christ solely as role model rather than Savior,
- urge his hearers to give more in the offering plate,
- push them to try harder to be more Christ-like,
- offer them self-help,
- build up their self-esteem,
- promise prosperity and blessings to those whose faith is strong enough, and
- preach whatever it is his hearers want to hear.

Every time this happens, the devil rejoices. Every time Christ and His cross and His death for sinners is not preached, the devil rejoices. Every time itching ears are filled with spiritual nonsense, the devil rejoices. For it makes his job easier.

Before Jesus came on the scene and entered the synagogue and began teaching, the devil was as giddy as could be. For centuries he had been leading God’s people astray. He did this through rabbis who played lip service to God’s Word, but taught and applied it wrongly. Rather than pointing their hearers to the ultimate sacrifice, the promised scapegoat for sin, the rabbis taught that one could please

God through works of the Law. Rather than pointing their hearers to the true Messiah who would save them from their sin, the rabbis spoke of a worldly messiah who would free the Jewish homeland from Roman control. In fact, the teachers of the Law in charge of the synagogues were very good at telling stories and citing human traditions and opinions, but very poor at leading God's people to a knowledge of their sin and their need for the promised Seed of the woman.

That all changed when Jesus entered the synagogue and began teaching. In fact, Saint Mark tells us that the hearers **“were astonished at His teaching, for He taught them as one who had authority, and not as the scribes.”** Jesus' preaching was music to their ears. He read God's Word, opened up their hearts to hear and understand and believe it, pointed out their sin, and identified Himself as the One who would redeem them. Having heard other messages for so long, and because God's Word cut them to the heart, the hearers were truly astonished at Jesus' teaching.

That being said, there was one person in the synagogue who was not happy with Jesus' teaching. This man had an unclean spirit. This is the first of many demons Saint Mark identifies throughout his Gospel. Demons are disruptive. They take control of the ones they possess. When this particular unclean spirit heard Jesus speak with authority the words and promises of God, when he heard Jesus speak of sin and grace, repentance and forgiveness, it was too much for him. So 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.”**

Though I doubt any of you have ever been physically possessed by an unclean spirit, you know from experience the many ways the devil continually assaults you. Temptations. Enticements. Evil desires. Your arch-enemy knows your sinful flesh and your weaknesses better than you. He knows how to incite you to anger, resentment, and jealousy. He knows what to place before your eyes to bring forth lust, greed, and covetousness. He knows how to drive a wedge between you and your spouse, how to divert you from raising your children in the fear and knowledge of the Lord, how to turn you against friend and neighbor. What's more, he knows how to distract you from God's Word, keep you away from Christ's Supper, and sidetrack you so that your devotional and prayer life falls apart. Make no mistake about it, he is the master of a thousand arts and he uses them all to attack your faith in Jesus Christ. An honest assessment of your failures and sins should cause you to cry out to the Lord: “What have you to do with me, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy me? Your holiness is too much for me.”

The answer, of course, is No! Jesus has not come to destroy, but to save. **“For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost”** (Luke 19:10). That is evident in today’s Holy Gospel, for the same Jesus who taught with authority used His authority as God’s Son to seek and save the man with the unclean spirit. After hearing the demon’s mockery, Jesus rebuked him, saying: **“Be silent, and come out of him!”** And sure enough, Jesus’ word does what it says. With surgical precision, the great Physician of body and soul removes the demon’s claws from this poor man and casts him out, leaving this man free to rejoice in Christ.

Free in Christ. That is your joy as well. For this same Savior has gone to the cross and won the ultimate victory over the forces of hell. There He took into Himself every sin, was forsaken by the Father, and suffered and bled and died to make atonement. He did it all to crush the devil’s head and forever silence his accusations. He did it for you.

Yet, the evil one has not given up. Though he is headed for eternal destruction in the great abyss of hell, he still aims his flaming arrows at you. He wants to drag you down to where he is. What will you do? Will you be strong in the Lord and in the strength of His might, or go it alone? Will you put on the whole armor of God, or hide behind the façade of self-righteousness? Will you fill your ears with Christ, or accumulate for yourself teachers to suit your own passions?

As Saint Paul reminds us: **“We do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places”** (Ephesians 6:12). So be found daily in your baptism. Confess your sins and hear Christ’s absolution regularly. Hold preaching and God’s Word sacred and feast on Christ’s true body and blood every Lord’s Day. Through these, your Lord Jesus puts on you **“the whole armor of God”** — the belt of truth, the breastplate of righteousness, the shoes of the gospel of peace, the shield of faith, the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit — **“that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil”** (Ephesians 6:11).

Friends, every unclean spirit must yield to the Holy One of God. Yet, as Jesus will later tell His disciples: **“Nevertheless, do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven”** (Luke 10:20). Your name is written in the book of life, signed with Jesus’ own blood. So **“enter His gates with thanksgiving and His courts with praise”** (Psalm 100:4). And then return home astonished, for His Word and Supper have justified you and freed you from the evil one.

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

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Jesus Christ unto life everlasting.

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