EPIPHANY 4, B – January 31, 2021

SCRIPTURES – Ps. 32; Deut. 18:15-20; 1 Cor. 8:1-13; Mark 1:21-28

 *Jesus entered the synagogue and was teaching. They were astonished at his teaching, for he taught them as one who had authority, and not as the scribes.* Mark 1

*“Have you seen him? Such a commanding voice and powerful presence! Where does he get this? How can he do the things he does?”* I know; you’re thinking about Tom Brady. 43 years old, but he’ll be in his 10th Super Bowl next Sunday! How can he do what he does? Well, sorry, no matter how fascinated you are with Brady, we’re here to talk about Jesus, so I’m going to focus on Him.

Who is this Jesus of Nazareth? The Scriptures during these weeks of Epiphany ask, and answer, this question. He’s more than just Mary’s little boy, isn’t he? Oh, he’s much more. Mark’s recounting of one of the first times he taught in Capernaum, of what happened and how the people responded, reveals two things about him: Jesus is an authoritative teacher… *the* authoritative teacher about God, in fact; and, he is God’s authority and power, present and active to help and save.

First, that Jesus is an authoritative teacher about God: the people themselves saw this very clearly. How different he was from their other teachers, the scribes! And it wasn’t because he was louder, or told better stories. Jesus was certain, and that’s what was different. When the scribes taught, it was always, *“Well, God seems to be saying this… as Rabbi Joseph pointed out in his sermon… and as Rabbi Cohen also affirmed.”* Uncertainty and opinion… quoting others to back them up… this was how Israel’s teachers taught in Jesus’ day. But Jesus: he clearly and forthrightly taught about God and declared with complete certainty what His words meant. ***“You have heard that it was said… but I say to you…”*** (Matt. 5) I say: Jesus claims to be *the true* and *final* interpreter of God’s written word! Keep this in mind and take it to heart, for many theologians and preachers today twist the words of the Bible around as if it were a rubber nose. *“Your heart will tell you it means!”* they say. *“Be open to many ideas. The only thing you should be wary of is the arrogance of certainty.”*

Phooey! Listen to Jesus, for He is certain of what God’s Word says. A sermon he preached in Nazareth right before he went to Capernaum gives us a good summary of His teaching. In the synagogue in Nazareth, Jesus read these words from Isaiah:

***“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 favor.”*** (Is. 61:1-2)

*“This is now fulfilled, for it’s about me,”* Jesus then told the people. Good news to poor and undeserving sinners… help and comfort from a God of love and mercy; and given *in Him*, for He is *God’s true ambassador*: this is what Jesus proclaimed. It is what His preachers are to proclaim without reservation today, for this is what God’s words declare. Jesus is your Savior, not a lawgiver or a judge! Seek this message, this preaching! If you’re not hearing this, you might as well talk about Tom Brady.

Jesus’ preaching brought forth quite a response in Capernaum. ***“Immediately there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit.”*** It sounds like he ran in to confront Jesus! ***“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.”*** Now, unclean spirits – demons – are liars and deceivers. Oh, this one did speak truth about Jesus. He is the Holy One of God. But, this spirit’s intent was to make people afraid of Jesus. *“He’s the Holy One… and he’s right here! You can’t hide from him! He is a threat to the unclean… to sinners!”* Again, there is truth in this. God is holy, and threatens to punish sinners. And, we can’t hide our sins from Him. He who has lived among us in our flesh intimately knows what we think and desire and do!

And yet, we do try to hide our sins. We hide behind computer monitors that we only look at when no one else is around. We hide behind smiles and nice responses that mask what we really think. We hide behind the fact that everyone is a sinner, and so use that to consider others – and especially those who are more obviously bad – to be the examples of the sins that God condemns, and not ourselves.

Ps. 32 says, ***“Blessed is the one in whose spirit there is no deceit”*** – who does not lie to himself. When God by His Word and preaching makes you squirm, feel uncomfortable and guilty… don’t hide this or deny it! This is not only useless (for, God knows the truth); it is the greatest of sins, for it is calling God a liar. ***“Blessèd is the one whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered,”*** the psalm assures us. And so: ***“I acknowledged my sin to you, and I did not cover my iniquity; I said, “I will confess my transgressions to the Lord,” and you forgave the iniquity of my sin.”*** This is what God wants of you. It is why He sent us His Son. Yes, Jesus is the Holy One of God: God Himself among us, as the unclean spirit proclaimed. But, His holiness is for our forgiveness and salvation.

See this in the fact that He came among us in the flesh, as a human being like us. See this in His going to the synagogue in Capernaum. Yes, He did cast out the unclean there… the unclean spirit, but not the man the spirit possessed, or any other person. Read through the Gospels, and see the entire ministry of Jesus. He silenced and cast out many demons… but He did not cast people out. Yes, He threw the money-changers and sellers of animals out of God’s temple; but this was so that the people could hear His teaching. He often argued with Israel’s teachers, and especially when they were twisting God’s words… but He did not strike them down. No, by His holy and true understanding of God’s Word He taught them and tried to help them see the truth. Jesus struck no one down. Instead, He assumed the uncleanness of their sin… and of yours and mine, and the sins of all people, and He was struck down for them on a cross. God counted your sins against Jesus, not you, and in His death the uncleanness of your every sin is hidden and covered from His sight.

Show your belief in this, your faith in Jesus, by confessing your sins! ***“Let everyone who is godly offer prayer to you”*** – prayers for forgiveness! – ***“at a time when you may be found,”*** says Ps. 32. The godly person, you see, is not the person who is nice and good and full of good deeds. The one God considers godly is the sinner; the one who admits his sin and trusts in Jesus for forgiveness!

God wants sinners, not wimpy believers who hide their sins in their denials and excuses. He wants confident believers, people who believe in His mercy and love in Jesus and so confess their sins and hide them in His wounds. God wants confident believers who, having been forgiven, then go forth to forgive those who sin against them; who cast out the uncleanness of their sins, instead of casting them out by their anger and rejection.

Be bold in this! You can be, for ***“steadfast love surrounds the one who trusts in the Lord,”*** Ps. 32 promises. Jesus, the God of mercy and love, and the giver of the knowledge of God and understanding of His will, is with you! Be bold, then, to expect, to *demand*, that He make plain what God teaches in His Word. Be bold to demand confident and bold teaching and preaching. Be bold in your faith! For:

**Jesus has come! Now see bonds rent asunder!**

**Fetters of death now dissolve, disappear.**

**See Him burst through with a voice as of thunder!**

**He sets us free from our guilt and our fear,**

**Lifts us from shame to the place of His honor.** (LSB 533:2)

Jesus has come! He – the Holy One of God – is our Savior! Amen.