EPIPHANY 4, C – January 30, 2022

SCRIPTURES – Jer. 1:4-10, 17-19; 1 Cor. 12:31 – 13:13; Luke 4:31-44

*Jesus rebuked [the unclean spirit], saying, "Be silent and come out of him!" And when the demon had thrown him down in their midst, he came out of him, having done him no harm. They were all amazed.* Luke 4

My Friday morning devotional reading began with Ps. 12. These words from the Psalm struck me:

*Save, O Lord, for the godly one is gone; for the faithful have vanished from among the children of man… On every side the wicked prowl, as vileness is exalted among the children of man.* (Ps. 12:1, 12)

This struck me because that morning there was going to be a huge funeral in NYC for a police officer who had been gunned down by a man with a lengthy rap sheet. And in the two preceding days 7 other officers had been shot: one in PA; one in Milwaukee; two in St. Louis; and three in Houston. Add to this the organized lootings of stores by gangs in recent months and the brazen shoplifting taking place right in front of security guards who don’t lift a finger to stop it. Crime is on the rise in our country, and Ps. 12 seems to hit the nail on the head as to the reason: ***“On every side the wicked prowl, as vileness is exalted among the children of man.”*** What should be seen as vile is, too often, being tolerated and excused; with predictable results.

This is bad. But, we see in our Gospel reading today a far more vile wickedness that is also prowling: a man possessed by the spirit of an unclean demon confronts Jesus. Just consider that he confronts Jesus, and does so while He is preaching in the synagogue. Now, the unclean spirit knows precisely who Jesus is: ***“I know who you are — the Holy One of God,"*** he cries out. Still, he confronts Him… and interrupts His preaching! If that unclean spirit was so bold as to interrupt Jesus and try to distract people from hearing Him, do you think that any unclean spirit – and there are many, Scripture warns – will be hesitant about confronting you and me while we are in church? Hesitant about trying to distract from my preaching? Oh, we are far easier pickings. We, after all, are not holy like Jesus, but regularly wrestle with unholy thoughts and desires and with the memories of our own uncleanness. And my preaching is that of a sinner who fumbles with words and with properly understanding the Scriptures and with making them interesting and not boring. And then, there’s the fact that the unclean spirit who confronts Jesus is hidden within a man in the synagogue. I’m sure the other people had no idea that the man had an unclean spirit within him, because they surely would not have allowed him in their synagogue if they had known. They did not know… and neither can we know if, or when, an unclean spirit might confront us. Peter warns, ***“Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour”*** (1 Pet. 5:7). We should not expect that it will be different for us who listen to the preaching about Jesus than it was for those who listened to the preaching of Jesus Himself!

But, be encouraged by this: Jesus was also hidden, in a sense. The unclean spirit didn’t cry out in fear of being destroyed by Jesus because Jesus stood before Him shining brightly in the brilliance of His eternal holiness. No, He went to the synagogue as a normal man: hailing from the nearby village of Nazareth… clothed in a simple robe and sandals, like anyone else… walking in, and not suddenly materializing in the midst of the people… being handed the Scriptures, and teaching them as would any of their rabbis (although, yes, with an authority that astounded the people). It wasn’t Jesus’ glory that revealed the unclean spirit and made it afraid, but the Scriptures that He taught; the same Scriptures which have been handed down for us to hear and consider and take to heart.

Those Scriptures make you great! – as you hear them and believe them and take them to heart. We see this in today’s reading from Jeremiah. God says to him, ***"Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations."*** He didn’t feel so great. ***“I do not know how to speak, for I am only a youth,"*** Jeremiah protests. But God will have none of it. ***"Behold, I have put my words in your mouth. See, I have set you this day over nations and over kingdoms,”*** he says. You are My great servant, Jeremiah. So, go and speak what I have given you to say!

Ok, so God by His Word made Jeremiah His great prophet. What about you? Consider what Jesus said one time when He was teaching in a house. It was so packed with people that when His mother and brothers came to see Him they could not get in. When He was told that they were outside and wanted to see Him, He responded, ***“My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it.”*** (Luke 8:21) Jesus considers you who listen to His teaching and believe it to be His own family! You share the same Father and have the same home. What is His is also yours. This all comes through His Word. How great it makes you! For, it brings Jesus to you and binds Him to you. As He is Lord over heaven and earth, so are you. You need not fear anything, then: no unclean spirit; no sickness; not even your sins. The One who had authority to rebuke them and cast them out is with you as your brother who loves you.

Rejoice in this, and humbly and gladly hear His teaching and preaching while you can! For, Jesus is the Holy One of God. He will not be at your beck and call, to come and bless you whenever you desire.

* The people of Capernaum wanted Him to stay with them, but He refused. ***"I must preach the good news of the kingdom of God to the other towns as well,”*** He told them.

And, none of us knows what tomorrow will bring. We do know that we live in the midst of many dangers, and in our frailty we cannot always stand upright.

So: hear the preaching of Jesus while you can, and believe in the deliverance from every and all uncleanness that it brings! Support this preaching, for yourself and for others, with your offerings and your prayers. Then, even though the wicked prowl on every side, and vileness is exalted among the children of man, the Lord who put His words in your ears and your heart will set you over them. Nothing unclean will enter you or harm you, for Jesus, the Holy One of God, will keep you as His own beloved holy one!