

St. James Evangelical Lutheran Church  
 Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany (Year B)  
 January 29, 2006  
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Today's Texts:

Deuteronomy 18:15-20  
 Psalm 111  
 1Corinthians 8:1-13  
 Mark 1:21-28

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord, Jesus Christ. Amen.

In our Old Testament lesson from Deuteronomy Moses assures the people that God will continue to guide them. Telling them, "The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me. I will put my words in the mouth of the prophet, who will speak to them everything I commanded."

By putting this reading in context with the Gospel reading for today, St. Mark is identify Jesus as the prophet like Moses, yet who is greater than Moses. Moses' power and authority came from God.

For us as readers and hearers of God's Word, we know that Jesus power and authority comes from his being the "son of God" before we ever hear the demon's pronouncement that Jesus is the "Holy One of God." There will be no evaluation to displace what we have learned.

The detail is an important one. At no point in the gospel do we as readers operate on the same level as characters in the drama because we already know. We live in a time where the "marketplace of ideas" becomes a smorgasbord of faith beliefs, where all the delectable dishes placed before us to choose from seem to hold equal value.

For such a culture, Jesus will be hard to swallow. God's epiphany takes on flesh, assumes a specific shape. The "good news" that God manifests himself in flesh is tied to Jesus, a young Jewish male. This revelation is affirmed by a particular history that goes beyond the Bible because his life is supported by other Ancient writings. Furthermore,

Not only does Jesus teach as one with authority. The first event in Jesus' ministry is a dramatic exorcism. It reveals what is to come. Mark's Jesus is less a teacher than an exorcist. He will exorcise demons five times in the Gospel of Mark. Jesus is an activist. His ministry will be one of conflict—mostly with the powers of evil. Jesus not only heralds in the kingdom of God, Jesus serves as God's agent—the incarnate one. Jesus, possessed with the Spirit of God invades Satan's domain to caste out and conquer evil spirits.

The author links Jesus' power in both word and deed by bringing together teaching and healing, as evidence of his amazing authority. Yet, perhaps the more significant contrast is the one between Jesus' teaching and the scribe's teaching.

Scribes were the people who originally copied the scriptures. They became experts or scholars in the law. As such, they taught the Torah and rendered binding judgments regarding its application. As many judges do today, they were rather conservative in their judgment and derived their authority from the knowledge of earlier experts on the law. Being such important men the best seats in the synagogue were reserved for them. Unlike the scribes who based their teachings on those who had gone before them, Jesus teaches with personal authority.

The authority of Jesus comes from the Spirit that descended on him at his baptism (1:10). His authority comes from God because he is God incarnate.

In literature classes, students can spend days or weeks discussing an author's intent. They can develop theories and supporting arguments. They can debate endlessly or they can invite the author to visit and tell them his/her intent. Once the author explains it the issue is settled Jesus is God's way of sending the author.

*Who are the prophets whose voices we hear today?*

Pat Robertson declaring that Dover, PA is cut off from God because they voted against teaching the Theory of Intelligent Design in their science classes. I have not been trained to teach science so why would I want to teach something I don't know? Likewise why should science teachers taught to teach science be expected to teach matters of faith.

Are the prophets we hear the politicians who speak out and declare that God is on "our" side? How do we really know that we are following the will of God? Our God is not a vindictive God but a God of grace. Too often people speak without thinking. Forgetting where the true power lies. In so doing, we as Christians can do more damage to God's message than the powers of evil whom fight against God's Word.

In a speech etched in the Lincoln Memorial, President Abraham Lincoln chose not to invoke God on behalf of the cause for the Union because:

"Both read the same Bible, and pray to the same God; and each invokes God's aid against the other. . . The prayers of both could not be answered; that of neither has been answered fully. The Almighty has His own purposes . . . with malice toward none; with charity for all; with firmness in right, as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in; to bind up the nations wounds. . . to do all which may achieve and cherish a just, and a lasting peace, among ourselves and with all nations.

Speaking for God is dangerous business. A pastor friend of mine said that when I speak from the pulpit I should do so with fear and trembling because those who do so are held to a higher level of accountability especially if we lead people astray. A person ignorant of the Word of God is held accountable according to what he or she knows. Once we hear God's word, we are held accountable for what we know. Is ignorance bliss? I do not think so because when we come together to hear God's Word we are fed and nourished through the Holy Sacraments. We are nourished and supported when we gather as community. Both of these help sustain us through whatever may come our way during the week until we gather again.

We are all accountable to God. This is why pastors spend so much time in seminary. It is important that we receive the necessary training so we might serve God's people in accordance with God's Word. During this time of training, we also receive external affirmation by those who teach and guide us as they help us truly discern that our inner sense of God's call does indeed come from the Holy Spirit.

Just as we were all sealed with the power of the Holy Spirit in our Baptism, Pastor's are again sealed through the power and authority of the Holy Spirit to humbly serve God and God's people. Pastors are called as leaders in the church to guide the lives of those entrusted to our care in accordance to God's will wherever that call may be.

Contrary to what Pat Robertson thinks, no one can preach, teach or heal with the same power and authority of God who made himself known through the flesh of his Son, Jesus Christ. Today, pastors serve in the role of a scribe, a teacher, a rabbi in the Jewish tradition yet pastors are still fully human. Christ was the only one who was fully human yet fully divine.

In seminary, we are taught that we cannot teach and preach only the law of God, which reveals our sinfulness and drives us to the cross of Christ but that the law must be balanced with God's grace. Only through God's grace to we receive healing and forgiveness. God's grace is the only way any of us receive our salvation.

Renowned writer Henri J. M. Nouwen, in his book *Gracias! A Latin American Journal* writes:

“The most important question for me is not, "How do I touch people?" but, "How do I live the word I am speaking?" In Jesus, no division existed between his words and his actions, between what he said and what he did. Jesus' words were his action; his words were events. They not only spoke about changes, cures, new life, but they actually created them. In this sense, Jesus is truly the Word made flesh; in that Word all is created and by that Word all is recreated.”

For Christians it is not being right that counts. What is important is our love and concern for one another, especially those who do not share our values and perspectives. Just as God deals graciously with us, we are to be gracious toward others, even to the extent of loving our enemies. God loved us so much that He sent Christ with the power and authority to grant salvation to all people. Ignorance is not bliss. Bliss is knowledge in the Word of God and its redeeming feature for a world filled with pain. God's Word empowers and brings hope to all who hear it so as you leave this place go out and share it with others. Amen.