

Sermon for 31 January 2021 @ Bethesda UMC/Baltimore, Maryland

Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany

Scriptures: Deuteronomy 18:15-20; Psalm 111 (UM 832); 1 Corinthians 8:1-13; Mark 1:21-28

“Power”

“Power.”

Where did he get it?

Jesus appears on the scene, unannounced, no references, and there it is, in action, recognized by demons, working cures, so the people say, “What is this?”

Maybe he’s been studying with John, and finally asks John to baptize him, and John recognizes his pupil has surpassed him, and testifies, “You...go ... my work is done. You are the one we’ve waited for.”

Power. We’re at a disadvantage ... not because of the distance in time, or so far away in another land and language, but because we want scientific evidence ... and yet that doesn’t hold for everybody. We’ve just rediscovered science doesn’t explain everything important in our lives or our politics, or our health, or our economy.

This is a dream story. This is something we know better than we know ourselves. This is why we are here, literally. Customary as it is for us to gather and listen to stories out of this book, we want to know about power. “Lord, heal my sister.” “Lord, help me make up with him.” “Jesus, what have you to do with me?”

“But Jesus rebuked him, saying, ‘Be silent, and come out of him!’ And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him.....At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.”

Please. Don’t put this person on a pedestal. Don’t hold yourself back, and make him far away and unlike you. Let the power of his presence in the midst of your friends here, and the importance of this ordinary, customary practice of gathering with us, and hearing this familiar story read by someone you all know and accept in some way as a truth-teller, come home yet another time. Hear him ... hear me ... say, “You have power!” “You are made to have power, and to use it well, among those you love, and more than you can predict or even ever know.”

The evil spirit that holds you back, that causes you to doubt your effect on those around you; that keeps you down where you are meant to stand up...that spirit is not in charge of you any longer. This is a new day. This is why you came, faithfully, today. You are unfinished... but that is good news. You will go, and come again ... and you will find yourself driving out unclean spirits from others, and others will drive them out of you again.

This is the rhythm of life we celebrate together. In Christ, we progress. We stumble, and get help, and rise again ... And the goodness of it all never ceases to amaze us.

It came home to me again this week that nothing matters but the power to do good. Lord knows I forget that, get side-tracked, have to forgive myself and ask for help and start back on the path again. That explains everything. I'm never without some sign of goodness to head towards. That's my translation of Moses' saying in Deuteronomy that there will always be a prophet to send me direction. And because it's church, there's always St. Paul's voice reminding me there's always somebody trying to pull rank ... I'm awfully good at knowing more than my brother or sister in the fellowship. And the Spirit says, "Back off. Listen to him. Speak the truth in love to her." That's church, over and over, learning that, telling it, practicing it, listening to it. Growing in loving. And, because there's a psalm for every occasion, every Sunday, there's one for today that ends with this verse, "The fear" ... open your hymnbooks again and read that last verse on page 832 again, with me, verse 10: "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom; all those who practice it have a good understanding. His praise endures forever."

We have nothing to be afraid of. God is with us. We have power.

Through Jesus Christ we say it.

Amen.