

## **SCRIPTURE READINGS AND SERMON**

### **Fourth Sunday after Epiphany**

**January 31, 2021**

**Psalm 111:1–10 (ESV):**

**Great Are the Lord's Works**

1 Praise the LORD!

I will give thanks to the LORD with my whole heart,  
in the company of the upright, in the congregation.

2 Great are the works of the LORD,  
studied by all who delight in them.

3 Full of splendor and majesty is his work,  
and his righteousness endures forever.

4 He has caused his wondrous works to be remembered;  
the LORD is gracious and merciful.

5 He provides food for those who fear him;  
he remembers his covenant forever.

6 He has shown his people the power of his works,  
in giving them the inheritance of the nations.

7 The works of his hands are faithful and just;  
all his precepts are trustworthy;

8 they are established forever and ever,  
to be performed with faithfulness and uprightness.

9 He sent redemption to his people;  
he has commanded his covenant forever.

Holy and awesome is his name!

10 The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom;  
all those who practice it have a good understanding.

His praise endures forever!

**First Reading: Deuteronomy 18:15–20 (ESV):**

**A New Prophet like Moses**

15 "The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your brothers—it is to him you shall listen— 16 just as you desired of the LORD your God at

Horeb on the day of the assembly, when you said, ‘Let me not hear again the voice of the LORD my God or see this great fire any more, lest I die.’ 17 And the LORD said to me, ‘They are right in what they have spoken. 18 I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brothers. And I will put my words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him. 19 And whoever will not listen to my words that he shall speak in my name, I myself will require it of him. 20 But the prophet who presumes to speak a word in my name that I have not commanded him to speak, or who speaks in the name of other gods, that same prophet shall die.’

### **EPISTLE: 1 Corinthians 8:1–13 (ESV):**

#### **Food Offered to Idols**

8 Now concerning food offered to idols: we know that “all of us possess knowledge.” This “knowledge” puffs up, but love builds up. 2 If anyone imagines that he knows something, he does not yet know as he ought to know. 3 But if anyone loves God, he is known by God.

4 Therefore, as to the eating of food offered to idols, we know that “an idol has no real existence,” and that “there is no God but one.” 5 For although there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth—as indeed there are many “gods” and many “lords”— 6 yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist.

7 However, not all possess this knowledge. But some, through former association with idols, eat food as really offered to an idol, and their conscience, being weak, is defiled.

8 Food will not commend us to God. We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do. 9 But take care that this right of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak.

10 For if anyone sees you who have knowledge eating in an idol’s temple, will he not be encouraged, if his conscience is weak, to eat food offered to idols?

11 And so by your knowledge this weak person is destroyed, the brother for whom Christ died. 12 Thus, sinning against your brothers and wounding their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ. 13 Therefore, if food makes my brother stumble, I will never eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble.

### **THE GOSPEL - Mark 1:21–28 (ESV):**

#### **Jesus Heals a Man with an Unclean Spirit**

**21** And they went into Capernaum, and immediately on the Sabbath he entered the synagogue and was teaching. **22** And they were astonished at his teaching, for he taught them as one who had authority, and not as the scribes. **23** And immediately there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit. And he cried out, **24** “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.” **25** But Jesus rebuked him, saying, “**Be silent, and come out of him!**” **26** And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying out with a loud voice, came out of him. **27** And they were all amazed, so that they questioned among themselves, saying, “What is this? A new teaching with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him.” **28** And at once his fame spread everywhere throughout all the surrounding region of Galilee.

## **Sermon 5 – Fourth Sunday After the Epiphany**

### **“Authoritative Word”**

#### **Mark 1:21-28**

Dear friends,

Jesus begins His ministry with a bang in our Gospel lesson, which while nice to see begs the question of what precisely to take away from it. Jesus is doing... things, and those things are great, but He is not here doing those things to us, so what do we do with what He did back then? There is one prominent statement in this Gospel, and that deals with authority, so that's what I'm going to deal with. What does it mean to have authority? Why do the people find it so remarkable that Jesus has this? Is this good or bad? It is fairly safe to say that Jesus' authority is not like human authority, but how? Jesus teaches, drives out demons, and binds people by His word. I am here today to remind you that He still does this, despite the fact that He does not walk bodily among us.

All of the Gospels have their own way of showing Jesus, usually with special emphasis. Mark is Jesus the action movie. He never stops in Mark, blitzing from one miracle and teaching moment to the next without much pause for thought or elaboration. Jesus did a lot of work while He was on this earth, and Mark seems intent on showing us

as much of it as possible. Mark wants to establish this as his tone and purpose and so he begins Jesus' ministry on this note. It is supposed to communicate urgency, Jesus is in a real tearing hurry to do what He's here to do, and there's not a moment to lose.

**“21 And they went into Capernaum, and immediately on the Sabbath he entered the synagogue and was teaching. 22 And they were astonished at his teaching, for he taught them as one who had authority, and not as the scribes.”** Teaching. This is the first of Jesus' purposes on this earth. He taught and He preached. He used His words. Jesus is God's Word, and Mark shows us that the first priority Jesus has, and what Jesus spends a great deal of His three years on Earth doing, is getting into synagogues and preaching or teaching. So God's Word is using words to bring that Word to us. Why? Because it is by words that God chooses to work. That shows us much about words, for sure, but also about God. Words are important to God. He has whole commandments assigned to how we use them. Through words, God shows us Himself, He shows us His love, He shows us His work and why we need it. Through words, God invites us to see Him for who He is, and ourselves for who we are. On words alone, God can make a sinner finally know what sin really means, just how much of a doom it is, just how evil it is, and through words alone, God can show that same sinner the true love of Jesus, the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross, and so on. Furthermore, God can make all of this real and happen within a person just by speaking it.

Our words do not do this. I wonder if this was different in the Garden, before sin, but regardless human words are forever diminished by human sin. Our words are smaller. They don't have this kind of transformative effect. They don't change hearts. We can sometimes change minds by words, we can teach, we can inform, but we cannot change who people are by our words alone. In our society today, we have many, many words. Everyone seems to determined to shout every little thing they think into the ether, we have entire industries built around getting words to people's eyeballs, and in the process our skill with lying, our clumsiness, and our selfishness have transferred as well. What I

mean to say is this: We have so many words these days, and they mean so little. That's a shame for a lot of reasons, but one of the main ones is that it dulls us to how God speaks. God's words sound like more words, and we forget that they mean something, that they accomplish something.

Why am I saying this to you? To try to establish the reason why the people are so astonished that Jesus is speaking with authority. Jesus' words are actually doing something, and the people hearing Him recognize this. I call upon you too to recognize this. Jesus' words transform, they make happen, and what Jesus is saying is something that Mark records earlier. Repent, the kingdom of God is at hand. Jesus says the same thing to you. The content never changes. Repent, He calls upon us. Our sin makes us singularly unwilling to do this. It is always someone else's fault, or it is always the situation that drove us to it, or, nothing has really happened. We're fine. Jesus says you're not. He says the kingdom of God is here for you, and you need to enter it, otherwise you will not survive. You won't survive death, and you won't survive judgment. Those words should inspire us. In me, they often don't, because I have heard them so much. Further, I have heard too many words. I look for deeds. They should stir up our hearts, but our hearts can get hard, and so Jesus has to work harder. He does so with... more words.

But there's something else here too. **“23 And immediately there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit. And he cried out, 24 “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.” 25 But Jesus rebuked him, saying, “Be silent, and come out of him!” 26 And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying out with a loud voice, came out of him. 27 And they were all amazed, so that they questioned among themselves, saying, “What is this? A new teaching with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him.” 28 And at once his fame spread everywhere throughout all the surrounding region of Galilee.”** Jesus' words have the power to kick out unclean spirits. That's pretty impressive, but we don't have a lot of clear-cut demon possession these

days, particularly not among us. But this still goes back to a question of authority and what we do with all this.

Authority is something that comes from God alone. He is the sole holder of power, and He gives it out to human beings according to their job and their station in life. God gives authority to husbands in their relationship with their wives, parents in their relationship with their children, and government in its relationship with its citizens. But the exercise of that authority is something so different than what we think. If we have to summarize authority, I think the way we typically do it is, if someone has authority over you, they can tell you what to do and you have to do it. That's not what Jesus is exercising. He is telling what happens. He isn't just really self-confident or a really good speaker, He is telling and what He is telling is happening.

Jesus uses His authority not to order you around, not to place additional obligations on you. He doesn't use His authority to needlessly tell you off or make you jump. Jesus uses His authority to save you, first by telling you that you are sinner, then by telling you that He is here to forgive and take away that sin. He is essentially doing the same thing to you that He did to the possessed guy. You guys don't have literal demons driving you to act crazy, but you do have sin, and that makes you do things that you should not, think things you should not, feel things you should not. Having sin, like we all do, is like a low-grade, ever-present threat of possession. You have probably all been in a situation where your mouth starts talking, saying things you know you shouldn't say, and your brain is like ahhhh stop stop! That's sin. That's the canker inside of us all, the cancer at the heart of every human soul. Jesus' authority is the authority to tell you that you're different now. He's made you different. He's made you holy and pure, and your sins are forgiven, you are new again, and bam, it is so.

Make use of that authority. Human words can inspire, they can bring out feelings, they can encourage, bring down, incite. They have power. Divine words are infinitely more powerful. They can make you a whole new person with a whole new heart, and they

can change the course of your history and your destiny. Jesus tells you that you belong to Him, that He is with you, that He isn't going to leave you or forsake you, and by His authority that becomes true and real. Jesus in Mark is in a real hurry. He hasn't stopped. He's still in a hurry to get to you, to keep you steady in His faith. A lot of things are uncertain. Jesus' power is certain, you can trust it, and Mark shows you why. This guy un-possessed people just by barking at demons. He can make you who He needs you to be. He does make you who He needs you to be. He has done so again today. Now, we go out and we try to be that person, and we'll probably fail, but it won't change who we are. And that is true authority. The authority to serve you, stay near you, help you be better than who you are.

Amen.