

28 January 2007
Epiphany 4

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“Cruciform Authority”

Text: Luke 4:31-44 (Jer 1:4-10, 17-19; 1 Cor 12:31b-13:13)

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

It is clear in the Holy Gospel that we heard today that Jesus has authority. His teaching is not like that of other men, but is filled with astonishing authority. He rebukes demons and they have no choice but to obey. Even the tiniest micro-organisms that cause fevers and disease must obey His command and release their hold on men. The same God who spoke at creation and it was so, now speaks in Jesus – and it is so.

No wonder, then, that the people of Capernaum wanted Him to stay and tried to keep Him from leaving! They know a good thing when they see it. Imagine what life would be like if we could keep Jesus here all the time! The teaching! The healing! The peace and protection! Why, it would be . . . *a little heaven on earth.*

Perhaps you chuckle at such a thought, or look down upon the folks of Capernaum for wanting such a thing – trying to harness Jesus’ authority and use it for themselves! But is this not the same mistake you and I often make? For do not we (and many people today) want Jesus to come and fix our problems, expel the demons in our lives, heal our diseases, put down our enemies, and make our lives good and trouble-free? Yes, use your authority for me, Jesus. Stay, help me, and give me my best life *now!*

But Jesus does not stay in Capernaum. Not because He doesn’t want to help them – He does! The question is: how? And so He says, “*I must preach the good news of the kingdom of God to the other towns as well.*” He does not stay, first of all, because His authority is not just for them, but for the world.

But more importantly, He does not stay because while He did come to defeat sin, death, and the devil for us, He came to do so not just with the authority and power of His divinity, but in the weakness of His humanity. He became a man, conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the virgin Mary, that His victory for us be as a man for man; and not just for a time, but for eternity. And so the authority that Jesus possesses is not just as a great teacher, miracle worker and healer – it is the authority that will lead Him to the cross. (Jn 10:18) To lay down His life for the sin of the world, and to take up His life for the life of the world. And all His teaching and miraculous works point to that victory – the victory of the cross.

It is tempting though, is it not, to focus on the divine Jesus, the powerful Jesus, the miracle-working Jesus (that is, the *popular* Jesus!) . . . and not so much on the human Jesus, the weak Jesus, the bleeding and dying Jesus. For we do struggle much in this life, and we *need* Jesus to fix our families, fix our bodies, fix our relationships, fix our finances, fix our jobs, fix our whole messed-up, hate-filled, warring, self-centered world! And Jesus could do it. He could fix everything outside of us and around us, and give us nothing but peace and joy, and perhaps (as the people in Capernaum might have been imagining) give us that *little heaven on earth*. He could do it. Easily. The God of creation could again speak, and it would be so. Be the divine Jesus, the quicker-fixer-upper!

That's what Satan challenged and tempted Him to do in the wilderness. (Lk 4:1-13) He didn't ask for much, and it would have been *oh so easy* to do those little things; to put aside His humanity and use His divinity. He was the Son of God, after all! So why not prove it? . . . And that is also why, I think, the demons cry out in Capernaum – *twice* – that they know who Jesus is: *the Holy One, the Son of God*. To get the people of Capernaum to focus on the Jesus of power, and do away with the Jesus of the cross. And therefore to be *disappointed* with Jesus when He doesn't do what they expect. When He doesn't, for example, rise up in power and throw out the Romans, but instead lay down his life on the cross. . . . Oh, well, okay, I guess. . . . And may people today are disappointed like that, aren't they? When Jesus isn't doing what we think He should be doing. Maybe even at times you and me.

But Jesus is unwilling to sell your soul for that bowl of porridge. For the fantasy of heaven on earth. For even if Jesus should – by divine fiat – fix all the problems in the world, and all the problems in your life, **there would still be the problem of**

your heart, and the sin in it. The self-centered, me-first, pet-sin-loving, I'm-better-than-you sin in our hearts. And not only, therefore, would we quickly ruin everything again, we would be in a worse state than before – hardened in our sin, rather than forgiven of our sin.

But Jesus loves you too much for that. For a cross-less Christ may be popular, but is really no Christ at all. And so He stays not in Capernaum, but departs for a desolate place, and eventually for *the most desolate place of all* – the cross. Where He hangs alone with the sin of the world, with your sin and mine. Where He hangs *again* taunted by Satan to use His divine power and come down from the cross and prove His Sonship. Where He hangs forsaken, not only by His disciples, but even by His own Father. Where He hangs not to fix our lives, but to cleanse our hearts, *not with gold or silver, but with His holy precious blood and His innocent suffering and death.* [Small Catechism, explanation to the Second Article]

And never was there a more powerful sermon than the one He preached from the cross. Each of His final words expressing the love for us that kept Him there. The love that is “*patient and kind; [that] does not envy or boast; [that] is not arrogant or rude. [That] does not insist on its own way; [that] is not irritable or resentful; [that] does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. [That] bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. [That] never ends.*” The love that caused His incarnation, and to trade His life for yours.

And while the cross looked like defeat, by any measure or standard, the resurrection shows us the victory that was hidden there. And the same is true of our lives. To look at you and the struggles you are going through right now, and your fragile faith, and your doubts and fears – it all may not look or feel like victory now. But the resurrection will show the different reality that was there all along. The victory of faith that overcomes the world. (1 Jn 5:4) Faith in the crucified One.

And that is the good news of the kingdom of God. Not just healing for this life, but for eternal life. For this purpose was Jesus sent, and for this purpose He sent His prophets, like Jeremiah, the apostles, and His pastors still today. To turn us from our worldly near-sightedness; from our desire for power and not the cross; from the desire to improve our lot in this life to the promise of eternal life. Not that it is wrong to ask God for help in this life, *to rescue us from every evil of body and soul,*

possessions and reputation. [Small Catechism, explanation to the Seventh Petition] That is good! And proper. And He may even do as you ask. But do not lose faith if your Lord, in His perfect wisdom and love, does something other than what you ask; or delays; or even says no. If He appears weak to you, in the face of overwhelming problems. It is not so. For as Pastor Lingsch told us last week: Jesus always gives the best, *even if it does not always appear so.*

For His Word still possesses authority, and it is why you are here today. For His Word has given you faith, has washed you clean, forgives your sin, and feeds you with His very own body and blood. And through this authoritative Word, demons are still silenced and driven out, the sin-sick are healed, and the dead are raised to life beyond the grave. . . . And yes, all this is yours. For our Saviour did not stay in Capernaum, and went not only throughout Judea, but went to the cross; and now risen from the dead has come also to Vienna, VA. To be here for you. With His gifts for you. With his cross for you. With His victory for you. With His love for you. With His life for you. *That you may be His own and live under Him in His kingdom and serve Him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness, just as He is risen from the dead, lives and reigns to all eternity. This is most certainly true!* (Small Catechism, explanation to Second Article)

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.