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Epiphany 4

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“Clean and Free”
Text: Mark 1:21-28

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

Jesus was in Capernaum on the Sabbath and went to church. Nothing unusual about that. And He was teaching. Again, nothing unusual about that. What was unusual was that He was teaching as one who had authority - not like the usual teachers of that day, the Scribes. For the Scribes taught as ones under the authority of another, and rightly so, for so they are. But Jesus taught as if He was under the authority of no one; in fact, as if He was the authority! And so the people, we heard, were astonished, awe-struck. No one had ever done this before. What did it mean? Who was this Jesus?

Well, if the people didn't know what to make of it, there was one in that group who did. For in response - in *immediate* response, Mark tells us - to Jesus' authority, a man with an unclean spirit cries out: ***“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.”***

Now, several things strike me about this account so far. **First**, it seems as if no one knew there was a man with an unclean spirit among them. They all went to church that Sabbath, like normal. They all sat in their regular pews, in their regular places, like normal, like good Lutherans! They saw their friends and neighbors, and everything seemed to be fine. So maybe people with unclean spirits, people possessed by demons, don't always look like raving lunatics. Sometimes, you know, they look normal, just like you and me.

Just like you and me . . .

Sometimes I get questions about unclean spirits and demon possession and why it seems that happened so much in Jesus' day and not so much today. Well, maybe it *is* happening today. Maybe those folks just look normal and regular, like that day in Capernaum. We know that satan isn't going to rest. He does not grow tired as we do. And, in fact, as the end grows closer with each day that goes by, he is, if anything, increasing his efforts to keep people away from, and separate them from, Jesus. So don't be fooled.

And isn't it the case today that we are often surprised at those who are "possessed" (in a sense) by unclean spirits? When people who are looked up to, who are in positions of power, who are leaders, suddenly become the subject of scandal? When secret addictions and possessions suddenly - or *immediately*, as Mark would say - become known. Those who are possessed by lust or sexuality or drugs usually make the headlines. But that's not all. People become possessed with all kinds of unclean spirits - of anger, bitterness, and revenge; of false beliefs and destructive philosophies; of greed, despair, pride, and how many more? Possessing our minds, possessing our bodies, possessing our hearts, enslaving us to sins of all kinds. . . . And how about you? Who would be surprised at the unclean spirits that torment you? The sins that so entice you and seek to enslave you? You all *look* so normal, so together, so good. But is it true?

I think maybe these kinds of unclean spirits are even more dangerous. At least when you see a raving lunatic you know he's a raving lunatic! And you can see the danger. But these others are so insidious. They seem so harmless, maybe even fun and pleasureable and good. And worst of all, maybe even *manageable*. But don't be fooled. The powerful lure leads to a powerful trap and slavery to sin. Don't be fooled when things look "normal," when everything seems all right and going well. Maybe that's the time to be most awake and alert.

But here's the **second** thing that struck me: if the people don't know what to make of Jesus and His authoritative teaching and are not sure who He is - *that unclean spirit knew!* That unclean spirit may not, *at first*, have known who this Jesus of Nazareth who came into church that day was, but immediately, when it heard those words and authority, it knew! It knew that word and authority well. That word and authority that created the heavens and the earth, that word and authority that commands the heavenly host of angels, that word and authority that had cast satan and his followers (including this unclean spirit) out of heaven, *was now on earth* and speaking with that same authoritative word! And so *immediately* - because it could not endure those words for even a moment! - *immediately* the unclean spirit cries out in agony and fear. But not only agony and fear, but in subjection and humiliation. For they know the voice of God when they hear it.

Jesus rebuked him, saying, "Be silent, and come out of him!" And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying out with a loud voice, came out of him.

There's another *immediately*, although Mark doesn't use the word again. But it's clear. The unclean spirit is compelled. It is no longer in control. It is forced to submit and come out. **And here's the good news of this story for you and me.** That whatever sins or uncleanness or unclean spirits seek to possess you, haunt you, enslave you, or entice you, they can no longer rule you. For Jesus has come. He has

come to expel them and set you free.

For while expelling an unclean spirit in a little church in Capernaum might seem like small potatoes, its significance lies in the fact that it is the opening skirmish in a war that will lead to the cross, where the true power of God will be seen. For if it was in Capernaum that the unclean spirits heard what Jesus had to say to them, it is from the cross where we hear what Jesus has to say to us: *Father, forgive them*. For with the blood that flowed from the Lamb of God that day, the blood of the perfect and innocent One sacrificed for the sin of the world, the blood of the New Testament, our forgiveness, our cleansing, is won. We are not expelled - we are forgiven! We are cleansed.

That is the ***new teaching*** of Jesus the people heard that day in Capernaum - the Gospel. That in Him, God was reconciling the world to Himself. That in Him, the Old Testament was being fulfilled. That in Him, the unclean are clean again. Jesus wasn't preaching a new Law, but the forgiveness of sins and the cleansing He came to bring. And then Jesus showed it and did it. In effect, trading places with the man possessed. Jesus would take His uncleanness and captivity to death, to set this man free. That was the new, wonderful teaching the people heard - and saw - in Capernaum that day.

And that is the wonderful teaching we not hear and see today. For that Jesus, that authority, that wonderful cleansing and freedom is still the Gospel showing up in churches all over the world. For this authority Jesus has now given to His church on earth - to proclaim and give this wonderful forgiveness to all nations in His Name. For He took the uncleanness and captivity of all nations upon Himself on the cross. He really and truly traded places with us all, that we be set free. The unclean made clean again.

And so when you are baptized, that is Jesus speaking today: ***“Come out of him!”*** *Depart unclean spirit and make way for the Holy Spirit*. You may rule in this one, my child, no longer. And so you are set free from your uncleanness and your bondage to sin and death. For baptism is not just water, but the full power and authority of the cross applied to you.

And when you hear the words of absolution, that is Jesus speaking today: ***“Be silent!”*** To silence the accusations of satan against you, to silence your guilty heart and conscience, to silence the doubts and fears within you, for you are forgiven all your sins. And so you are clean, clean, for absolution is not just words, but the full power and authority of the cross applied to you.

And so you are set free. Free not to return to your uncleanness and death, but to live as a child of God. To rule over the sin in you, not be ruled by it. Like that day in

Capernaum, the voice of God has spoken and it is true! The unclean spirits know it. So believe this Word spoken to you, of forgiveness, of freedom, of adoption! Maybe it is hard to believe because you still feel the temptations, the pull and lure of sin; your flesh is still a traitor and the sin you really do not want to do, you do. The lashing out, the impulsive words and actions, the falling back in weakness, the questions and doubts. And satan right there to take advantage of it all, trying to convince you that you are no child of God, that you are not clean but unclean, that it's all wishful thinking. You left your baptism long ago; those words of forgiveness are meant for others, not you.

But it's not Jesus' words that are hollow and untrue, it is satan's words that are hollow and untrue. You are a child of God. You are forgiven and clean. And that you may be renewed and strengthen in this reality, the powerful and authoritative voice of Jesus speaks again, saying to you: *Take eat, this is My Body given for you. Take and drink, this is My blood of the New Testament, shed for you for the forgiveness of sins.* Those words, too, mean what they say. They are not hollow and untrue. Jesus feeds you with His very Body and Blood, for you are His, you are clean, you are free, so *depart in peace.*

Like that man in Capernaum that day. He entered tormented, he departed in peace. Jesus made all the difference. And so for you. However you entered this place today, whatever sins tormenting you, whatever worries consuming you, whatever burdens weighing you down, Jesus sets you free. That unclean spirit in Capernaum was *almost* right when it said that Jesus is ***the Holy One of God.*** No, He is your Holy One, *your* Saviour, *your* forgiveness, *your* peace and rest. That will finally and fully be revealed on the Last Day, when His resurrection becomes our resurrection. But it no less true now. You are His and He is yours. You are clean. Depart in peace.

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.