



Fourth Sunday after Epiphany

Sermon by Ven Moses Thabethe



Sunday 31 January 2021

READINGS

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

Allowing God to amaze us with His power and authority

Over the past weekend, we witnessed the devastation caused by the Tropical Storm Eloise in the regions of Mozambique, Limpopo, Mpumalanga and surrounding areas. Simply watching the destruction of homes, displacement of people made me ask the question that I believe is on everyone's lips: *How long O Lord, must your people suffer? Is the devastation caused by COVID not enough?* Now, people whose homes have been destroyed are having to fight two pandemics at the same time right at the beginning of a new year! This then leads to a reflection on the lectionary readings for this Fourth Sunday After the Epiphany. When one listens carefully to the Gospel reading, one could say that this passage is perhaps most suited to preach at the tail-end of a turbulent and disappointing first month of a new year.

Most of us know the Gospel story pretty well, as this is the launch of Jesus' ministry in the Gospel of Mark – Jesus casts out an evil spirit and the bystanders perceive Jesus as one who teaches with great authority.

In our Gospels, the “first things” we hear about the beginning of his ministry, tend to set the tone for much of what is to come – they offer a preview of the Evangelist's own understanding of who Jesus was and what his mission was to be about.

In Matthew, the introduction of Jesus's ministry is demonstrated by Jesus climbing a mountain to teach and interpret the law, like Moses.

In Luke, Jesus announces that the Lord has sent him to proclaim good news, release, and healing, a message that illustrates his ministry even as it is met with rejection.

And in John's Gospel, the first thing Jesus does is multiply the wine and blessing at Cana, fulfilling the promise of God's provision of “grace upon grace” promised in the opening chapter of John's Gospel.

So what is the first thing that we note about Jesus in the Gospel of Mark with the healing of the man with an unclean spirit? As Jesus is teaching in a synagogue, a man interrupts him. While the synagogue worshippers are dumbfounded by Jesus' teaching, this man, whom Mark tells us has an “unclean Spirit,” seems to know exactly who Jesus is. He cries out at Jesus – I know who you are, you're the holy one of God.

Now, some scripture scholars say the “unclean spirit” might have been a form of mental illness, or as a medical condition like epilepsy. Others say that it was an actual demon — an evil spiritual force that possesses and controls a human being. Still others argue that spirits in the New Testament are metaphors for anything that might “possess” or “control” us and thus rob us of a meaningful life. I don't think it

matters what this was. What matters is that the man was suffering under this condition: he had no voice of his own, he had no control over his body, he was isolated and dehumanized. That is the condition that Jesus saw.

Under normal circumstances, in the midst of such interruption, we would just pause and wait for things to calm down. But not Jesus – he takes immediate action! He tells the spirit to be silent and to come out of the man. At this, the spirit released the man and the people were amazed at such power and authority.

This, therefore, is the first thing we note about Jesus in the gospel of Mark: that Jesus has come to oppose the forces of evil, meaning that Jesus has come to oppose anything and everything that robs God's children of abundant life. Thus he amazes the bystanders and they are astounded?

When was the last time Jesus astounded and amazed you? Let's face it, we live in times where everything around us is rough, scary and deadly. Almost one year into the Covid-19 pandemic, many of us are still battling a deep and persistent discomfort. We are exhausted, anxious, depressed and maybe even hopeless. We're too worried about the future to live attentively in the present moment, and rightly so – because when we hear of death and illness every day, we cannot help worrying about our future and the future of those whom we love. For many worshippers, church is still online, so our access to spiritual community, the worship space, the usual rituals, and sacraments is still limited.

Where, in the midst of all of this, might we experience a sense of awe? Wonder, astonishment, surprise? Where can we find a voice of authority, power and healing that can straighten us back into full and vibrant living, not sometime in the future, but *now*?

The people who had gathered in the synagogue were no different from us. All we know is that they showed up in the synagogue, listened to Jesus teach, and allowed his words to penetrate their hearts and bring a sense of freshness, newness, and transformation. They came to the synagogue with an attitude of curiosity and openness. Alongside whatever sense of responsibility, tradition, and habit compelled them to show up that day, they must have also held onto the possibility of surprise, surprised by God – that God might just show up and do something different in their midst.

Perhaps then, the question is not where can we find a voice of authority but rather, do we approach God, Scripture, church, and faith in this way? With anticipation? With a hunger for encounter? Or have we allowed the challenges of this present time to make us cynical? However we worship these days -- over Zoom, via YouTube, on Facebook, in person -- do we come before God, desiring and expecting God to be truly present in our midst?

The people in Mark's Gospel were "amazed and astounded" by the work of God because they allowed Jesus to be unfamiliar in their midst so that they could behold his power, his authority. We too can behold his power in the midst of powerful forces that rob us of life. Of loved ones. Of community. Of safety. Whether we regard such forces as spiritual, psychological, biological, metaphorical, or cultural, this Gospel story tells us that we too can recover a capacity for holy amazement – so that our lives are never the same again.

Let us open our hearts to receive words of healing from Jesus so that we in turn, can speak words of loving, healing authority to a world that longs for an encounter with the divine. Amen.