

“As One with Authority”
Epiphany 4b
Mark 1:21:28

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Grace Lutheran Church
February 1, 2009

In Jesus' Name.

“Just then there was in the synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, and he cried out, ‘What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth?’” “Stay off of our turf,” in other words. “There is no place for you here.” The presumption of the claim is clear by where it is made, in the synagogue. The unclean spirit extended the Evil One’s reach even there – into God’s house.

Are there some areas of life and of our world sectioned off from Jesus’ authority? Would any of us seal off those compartments from Jesus’ authority even here, especially here? We quickly say no. I know we are sincere in saying it. But in practice, I think there are several areas we sequester. Politics is one of them. What we do with our bodies is another. Our use of money is a third. Religion and politics don’t mix we say. We cite the separation of church and state. In the wisdom of our nation’s founding documents, the civil authorities are prohibited from deciding what, if any, church we attend. The church authorities are prohibited from deciding who will be our civil authorities. The courthouse and God’s house may sit together on the public square but the traffic between the two is kept to a minimum. I have said before, I do not like sermons on politics unless the preacher’s politics agree with my own. What I struggle with is how that squares with what the Bible has to say about the interaction of religion and politics.

We had three adult education sessions on understanding the Old Testament prophets. A professor from Wheaton College did an excellent job showing us chapter and verse how the prophets’ business was to stick their nose into politics. They plied their prophetic trade in the king’s palace and on the public square. They consistently aimed a critical word from God at the political system for two things: worshiping other gods and injustice to the poor. “For these sins God will bring destruction upon you,” said the prophets.

All three weeks I was itching to ask the professor how this applies today. I was going to point out to him that after the terrorist attack on our country on September 11, 2001, preachers on the right said the attack was God's judgment on the nation for homosexuality and abortion. Clear evidence, they said that we have abandoned God. Preachers on the left said the attack was a manifestation of God's judgment on the nation for our oppressive foreign policy and neglecting the poor. Clear evidence, they said, that we have abandoned God. I never got to ask the question. Maybe he saw trouble brewing in the clerical collar sitting in the front row because he always talked right up to the point I had to leave to get ready for church. It is just as well. I see a number of problems with both statements. Both statements equate God's Old Testament covenant people Israel with the United States and our government with the Davidic king. I don't think they equate. However, the biggest problem with both statements is they are outrageously heartless.

In the first reading today God promises the people God will raise up a prophet like Moses. You remember how Moses got the job. God said, "No one can look upon my face and live." The people could not even stand a direct hearing of God's voice. So, Moses came into the presence of God on their behalf. Even so he only got a look at God's backside, a detail from the Exodus story that delighted Luther no end. Moses brought them the Word of God. But he also brought God a word from the people. When God was ready to dust his hands clean of them and start over somewhere else, with the Hittites maybe, Moses advocated on behalf of the people. He was the mediator who took God's cause to the people and had God's ear to explain the people's case to God. A prophet like Moses has compassion, God's compassion, for the people. It was out of compassion that the prophets spoke God's word of judgment. After some catastrophe the prophets did not say "I told you so" and gloat but spoke God's word of restoration. Neither of those voices we heard after 9/11 fit the description of a prophet like Moses.

In today's gospel we hear Jesus as such a prophet. He is much more than that, but is at least that, the mediator between God and us. The Holy Spirit proceeding from Father and Son

advocates God's cause to us. The Spirit reminds us what Jesus said and did for us. The Spirit warns us away from what is harmful to us. Jesus advocates our cause before God. With Jesus bodily raised and ascended, there is one of us in the Trinity. He has God's ear. The accuser, the one who would whisper in God's ear all the dirt on us has been thrown out of God's heaven just as Jesus drove the unclean spirit out of the man and out of the synagogue.

That said, are there some areas of our lives and our world from which Jesus' authority has been crowded out? How about the grave? God employs Jesus' tomb as a version of the Trojan Horse ruse. When Jesus dies, the Evil One thinks there is one area at least cloistered from God's power. And, if that is the case, he can leach deadly power into other areas of our lives, trying to isolate us under the guise of protecting our privacy, until he has isolated us from Christ's body and from Christ. But from within death's walled city God raises Jesus to life. Jesus brings God and therefore light and life even to the grave.

Is hell at least safe from God's authority? John Milton in his epic poem *Paradise Lost* has Lucifer saying, "I would rather rule in hell than be ruled in heaven." But Jesus descended into hell not as a part of his humiliation but to proclaim his victory over all the forces hostile to God.

If neither death nor hell is separated from Jesus' authority it follows that nothing else can be: not politics nor our use of money nor what we do with these bodies God has created. I think the common response at this point is, "I do not separate Jesus' authority from these areas but it is a private matter, between me and Jesus." But if we are part of the body of Christ it cannot be a private affair between just me and Jesus. Such was Paul's argument with a group in the congregation in Corinth. This group claimed to be the Spiritual superstars. They had all sorts of spiritual gifts, which meant, they said, they transcended earthly things. That translated into they could do what they wanted. They were free to eat meat offered to idols, as we heard in the second reading today. That is not exactly something we are worried about. We wouldn't even know where to get meat from an animal offered in sacrifice to an idol. But Paul also addresses

issues of sex and money in this same regard. This is not your private affair, Paul said. You are part of Christ's body. Part of the Evil One's strategy is to use would-be prophets and preachers who address these issues without compassion.

One preacher I know got an earful one Sunday morning from a man in the congregation who took offense at some rather pointed statements made in the sermon. After listening for a while the preacher said, "I'm just telling you what the Bible says. Don't get mad at me. You heard the text. God was clear in denouncing the government for indifference to the poor while promoting policies that put yet more bonus money in the pockets of the rich. Don't get mad at me. Take it out on the Bible. Get mad at God." The preacher's dodge was a bit disingenuous. He put a partisan spin on the text as he preached it. But he does have a point. We do not speak with our own authority. Jesus was the only one who could teach without footnotes and without quoting the experts to build his case. This means we must couch our statements in humility. We may be wrong. And we must be generous to those in the body of Christ who think differently. For example, my archconservative friend, the one who thinks Bill O'Reilly is a moderate, is on his seventh mission trip with members of his congregation to Haiti. He too wants justice for the oppressed and peace in the world. We have radically different ideas on how to achieve these goals. We both know the end to which God is bringing us.

To be true to Jesus' preaching we must at least raise questions about who is in charge. It was not Caesar in Paul's day and it is not the current occupant of the White House or the Kremlin. And I believe we are obligated to raise questions about what it means to be the crown of God's creation, whom God dignifies by sending the Son to die and rise for us. Raising such questions will put us at odds with and in danger from those who have raised caste or race or gender or political order to God's place. So it was for the prophets who have gone before us.

Now remember, if you don't like something I've said this morning, don't get mad at me. I'm only telling you what the Bible says. That at least, is the charge I have from God and from you, the people of God. It is what I strive to do. In Jesus' name.