

Sermon for the Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany

Imagine being in the synagogue in Capernaum that day.

You've been there before, lot of times. Today, though, there was a guest preacher. And while you've heard lots of sermons - some good, and some... well, some better than others - you've never heard preaching like this before. This was different. He was different. He spoke with authority. Like He was the author, explaining what He wrote. Like He was speaking what He had spoken before. That He was somehow in these words, and these words in Him. It was astonishing. And unlike some other sermons you've heard, you wished it wouldn't end. That's how captivating it was. He was.

But that was not the only astonishing thing in synagogue that day. There was that man. You didn't even know who he was. He looked normal enough, until he so rudely interrupted Jesus. And what he said... well, it was more than a little troubling. Like, he didn't want Jesus to be here with us. "Ha! 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." That's what he said. And, that's what we were all thinking... kind of. That He was a holy one. But not to destroy us... Why would he say that? Was there something to it? Did he know something we didn't? You'd heard the stories about priests going into the Holy of Holies in the Temple and not coming out alive. You didn't mess with the holy. Was there something more going on here than we knew...?

But then it ended as quickly as it had begun. And it was Jesus' word again. He didn't argue with the man, he simply told him to be quiet and come out of him. You'd heard about unclean spirits and people being possessed by them, but you'd never actually seen one before. That one could be so close to you and you didn't even know it was kind of unsettling. Were there more? But it happened as Jesus said. The man didn't say anything else - he simply fell to the floor and it was over. That was it. Jesus' words were not only astonishing, but had authority. What He

said wasn't just true, they happened.

At coffee hour after the service ended, we were all talking about it. Jesus didn't stay, though. He went right to Simon's house. But then it happened there too! Just as Jesus had rebuked the unclean demon, so He rebuked the fever that had kept Simon's mother-in-law from coming to synagogue that morning; the fever that some said had her near death. Some people laughed, for who talks to a fever? But it came out of her too. Just like that. But it was more than that. For when I've had a fever before, it takes me a few days to get my strength back after the fever breaks. But she got better right away. She got up right away and served them, like she'd never been sick at all. His words happen. His words make things happen.

Well, once word got around about that, there was no stopping folks! Everybody and anybody who was sick... they came out of the woodwork. It was like gridlock in Capernaum that evening! Everybody trying to see Jesus. And Jesus saw them all. He was so patient and kind. He didn't boast. He wasn't arrogant or rude. He was not irritable or resentful. He was full of joy. So many before Him had said so much, but they were like noisy gongs or clanging cymbals. Jesus was different. He just kept giving. Giving Himself. He kept preaching and things kept happening.

And He healed everyone. All who came. The Great Physician was the name your neighbor gave Him. But He was more than that. There were more demons, too. You didn't know there were so many around us, did you? And they were calling Him the Son of God. But He didn't want them to speak. It was like He just wanted to help. To make people better. To set them free. To give them hope. To love them. And He was good at it.

You watched for a while, but it got late, and it seemed like the people waiting to see Him was endless... In the morning, you went to find Him, to hear more, see more, receive more. But He was leaving. "I must preach the good news of the kingdom of God to the other towns as well; for I was sent for this purpose." That's what He said. It made you a little sad. That was one great day! And what about when you got sick? Sure would be nice if Jesus would be here for you then...

But something else He said... I was sent for this purpose. But who sent Him? It wasn't the Pharisees or Sadducees - they didn't like Him very much. Jealous, I guess... Maybe what the demons had said... you are the Holy One of God; you are

the Son of God. Could the One, the Holy One who dwelt in the Temple and made it holy, be dwelling now in this man from Nazareth? Not to destroy, but like at the Temple, to cleanse, to forgive, to make us holy?

It doesn't seem possible, or even probable. For cleansing, forgiveness, holiness - you needed sacrifices for that. You needed blood for that. It wasn't so easy, so available. It was costly. And you needed priests. You couldn't just go into the Holy place - only they could. But there was no denying what you had seen and heard. People were being cleansed and forgiven and holied. What happened in the Temple was happening in Capernaum... and Nazareth and Samaria and Cana and Tyre and Sidon and... everywhere Jesus was...

The prophets, like Jeremiah, had talked about such a day, when God Himself would come and shepherd His people (Jer 31:10). And then you remembered those words of John the Baptist you'd overheard by the Jordan - Behold, the Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world (John 1:29). And then you remembered that Jesus was killed on Passover, when all the lambs were killed (John 18:39). And then you remembered what Jesus said on the cross - priestly words! Speaking forgiveness to those who crucified Him (Luke 23:34). Speaking comfortingly to that man hanging next to Him (Luke 23:43), just like He did in Capernaum. Jesus still, even while He was dying, even while men and demons were taunting Him, still filled with love. Still patient and kind, not irritable or resentful, delivering up His body to be burned under the wrath of God on the cross...

Yes, His words, even there, astonishing... and happening. That man would be in Paradise with Him that day. There was forgiveness now... for everyone. For criminals, for crucifiers... even for you.

That day in Capernaum, it was like seeing dimly, but now you see it so clearly. Even more, you know He can see you. That day in the synagogue, you were just one in the crowd, yet it seemed like He was talking right to you. Because He was. He knew your heart, your sins. It was like He could see you through your skin. The fight you had this week. The harsh and hurtful words. The work you should have done but didn't do. The impure desires you had. The jealousy, the anger. How you looked down on others in your heart even though you knew you were no better. How you didn't pray because you thought it didn't matter, and how reading God's Word wasn't as important to you as that book you wanted to read.

He knew it all, and more. And yet still He spoke those astonishing words to you, today! I forgive you all your sins. And you were cleansed. It happened. Words with authority. And still He offers His body to you! His body once offered on the cross, and his blood shed there, now offered to you, to holy you. The Holy of Holies here. Take eat. Take and drink. The Lamb of God. The Passover Lamb. Today you will be with me in Paradise. And it's true. For what He speaks, happens.

For actually, you were there that day, in the synagogue, in Capernaum. Or actually, perhaps better to say, they are here with you. For the angels and archangels and all the company of heaven are here. For Jesus is here. For you.

What else did you expect when you came here today? Indeed, why else come here today? For the preacher? You've heard better sermons. For friends? You've got them at home. For the food? I don't even know if there is any today. For Jesus. Not because He needs you, but because you need Him. Because you need your unclean spirit expelled and its temptations silenced. You need to be healed of your sin-sickness. You need His love and hope, that when you die, death will not be the end for you. You need to hear words that happen - not the words of a skilled politician, but of a Saviour. You need comfort in your desolate place, a friend who will never leave you or forsake you (Deut 31:6). You want to be fully known, to give yourself completely, to hide nothing, to have no secrets, to rest in pure and unfailing love. And there's only one place that kind of love is - a love that bears all things; a love that never ends. In the Holy of Holies. In Jesus. The One who gives Himself like that to you.

For He was sent for this purpose. Sent by His Father. To Capernaum and to here. To you. Not to destroy you, but to destroy your uncleanness. To make you sons of God, holy ones of God, in Him. And He has. You are. For what He speaks, happens. He has loved you. He has worded you. So now... you who have heard, you who have received, can live that love, and in that love, for you have been filled with such love. Filled... with Jesus. And where you are, He is; and where He is, you will be. He promised. And what He speaks, happens.

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

Written by Rev. James Douthwaite

Sermon Texts: Luke 4:31-44; I Corinthians 12:31b-13:13.