

Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany  
February 3, 2019  
Luke 4:31-44  
“Needed Puzzle Pieces”

The season of Epiphany is about Jesus making Himself known. It’s about people discovering who He is. In our Gospel lesson for today, when Jesus visits Capernaum, we find four important puzzle pieces that teach us much about our Savior.

The first is that He teaches, and He teaches with authority. There’s a stunner of a passage just before this one in Luke 4, when Jesus is teaching in the synagogue of His hometown, Nazareth. He reads from Isaiah 61: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me, because He has anointed Me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent Me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.” Then He begins to teach about the text. But unlike the rabbis who might say, “This is a prophecy of the Messiah who will come someday,” Jesus declares, “Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” He’s not just another teacher saying that the Christ will come—He says that He is the Christ, standing before them. He claims that authority, and rightly so. In Nazareth, though, they don’t want the kind of Savior Jesus claims to be, a Savior who has come to save all, Jew and Gentiles alike. They reject His authority: in fact, they try to throw Him off a cliff, therefore He moves on to Capernaum. Here, in our Gospel lesson, the people are more receptive. They’re astonished at His teaching, for His Word possesses authority.

So what are His Word and authority good for? Here’s the second puzzle piece to fit into place: by His Word, Jesus shows He has authority over demons. A man with the spirit of an unclean demon cries out, “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” (Luke 4:34). Demon-possession is a terrifying thing, but Jesus is far from frightened. What does He do? He speaks. He speaks His authoritative Word. He simply says, “Be silent and come out of him” (Luke 4:35). The demon departs. It has no choice. There’s no great battle, no back-and-forth where the outcome is in doubt. Jesus speaks. The demon departs. The man is unharmed. The people are astonished: “What is this Word?” they ask. “For with authority and power He commands the unclean spirits, and they come out” (Luke 4:36). The news spreads across the region.

The Lord isn’t done: His Word does more than cast out demons, as if that weren’t enough of a demonstration of power and authority. He leaves the synagogue and goes to the home of Peter’s wife’s mother. She is ill with a high fever—a serious condition that can still kill even today, despite all of our medical technology. Jesus treats the fever the way He treated the demon: He rebukes it. We don’t have the words recorded, but He tells it to go away. Again, there’s no epic struggle, no need for Jesus to repeat Himself. He speaks. The fever is gone. Peter’s mother-in-law gets up and begins to serve them: she’s not just getting better. She’s fully healed. This, by the way, is the third puzzle piece revealing Jesus’ identity: by His Word, He shows that He has authority over sickness, too.

Meanwhile, the Word has spread like wildfire; and by sunset, people have brought any who are sick or demon-possessed to Jesus. He lays His hands on them and heals them. There isn't a single Savior resistant virus or evil spirit in the lot. It's no contest: He wins every time. When it comes to the demons, they can't even speak without His permission. When they cry out, "You are the Son of God," He shuts them up. It's not that they're wrong, but that it hasn't been given to them to reveal His identity.

When it's day, Jesus departs to a desolate place—likely to pray in solitude, as He does elsewhere in the Gospels. The people track Him down, which only makes sense: when you've got a miracle-working physician, you want to keep Him around. That's their plan: they want to keep Him from leaving. But He isn't going to stay. He speaks His authoritative Word to say, "I must preach the good news of the kingdom of God to the other towns as well; for I was sent for this purpose" (Luke 4:43). There's the fourth piece that we can fit into the puzzle of who Jesus is: as astonishing as the miracles are, that isn't why Jesus has come. He's come to preach the good news of the kingdom of God—not just in Capernaum, but in other towns, too. Jesus is going to go from town to town, calling people to believe in Him for their salvation—and by His authoritative Word, He's going to give them faith to believe in Him. As He continues to preach His Word, He's going to continue to fulfill the Word He preaches. He's going to keep performing miracles, because the Old Testament said that the people would know the Savior in part by the miracles He performed. He's also going to go to the cross to die for their sins; because, from the very beginning, God declared in His Word that that was what the Messiah would do.

So our text gives us four clues, four puzzle pieces that reveal who Jesus is. He speaks His Word with authority. He has authority over demons. He has authority over sickness. And He has come to preach the Gospel.

That was then. This is now. Unlike the people who were hearing and watching and wondering who this new Teacher might be, you know the answer. But those four clues about Jesus hold wonderful comfort for you, too.

First, it is still true that Jesus speaks with authority. He does so by means of His Word. He is not one more advice columnist or motivational speaker or politician who has come to tell you "somebody else" is coming who will solve all your problems. Usually, that "somebody else" that they talk about ends up being you. As long as you work hard enough or meditate seriously enough or help other people enough, then you're on the road to reconciliation with God. But you already know yourself, and you don't need any more of you—hearing God's Word, you know that you're the problem in need of salvation. So Jesus isn't one more eternal life-coach who says, "You have to do more to be saved." He says, "I've already done it all. I've gone to the cross and died for your sins. I am risen again. Salvation is yours." Jesus doesn't point to another. He points to Himself and says, "I am your Savior. I am the Way, the Truth and the Life." Not only is this good news, but it is His Word, spoken with divine authority. In other words, when Jesus declares to you in His Word that He is your Savior, He's not just giving news for you to believe: He is, in fact, giving you the faith by which you can believe the news He speaks.

His Word is like no other: He gives what He says by saying it. That is speaking with authority.

Second, it is still true that Jesus has authority over demons. It's rather unfashionable to speak of demons and demon possession these days—the world will tell you that it's all a bunch of superstitious hullabaloo, that primitive people were misled to believe that illness was actually a manifestation of the devil. The Lord, however, disagrees: His authoritative Word in Ephesians 6:12 says, "For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places." Those spiritual forces of evil haven't gone away. They just wear disguises.

So why are there all the demons in the Gospels? It sounds like Jesus is rebuking them left and right, and so He is. There's little doubt that there are a ton of evil spirits making themselves known during the time of Jesus' ministry. It may well be that His presence in the flesh ticked them off so much that they felt compelled to raise a fuss; or it may be that the Lord drew them out in order to show how powerless they were against His Word. But the relative absence of such events today does not mean that demons and the devil have ceased to operate, nor does it mean that demon-possession has ended. Every temptation you encounter is hurled at you by the evil one, and he is much too powerful for you. He is no match, however, for your Savior who still sends Satan packing by means of His authoritative Word. You've witnessed it yourself, surely, for you have seen the Lord's Word added to water and spoken over an infant at the font: "I baptize you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." With that, Jesus takes possession of His beloved child and sends the devil packing. The evil one doesn't put up much of a fuss like the demons in our Gospel lesson, for the last thing he'd want to do is provide evidence to you that Baptism actually does something. The Absolution does him similar damage: your sins give Satan a claw-hold by which to hang on as he whispers in your ear that you're condemned. But Holy Absolution exposes his accusation as a lie as it declares Jesus' authoritative Word that you're forgiven for all of your sins. This, too, sends the devil scurrying away into the cowardly darkness away from the light of Christ.

Third, it is also true that Jesus has authority over sickness—even death. He has, after all, borne all our sins and infirmities to the cross and died with them there before rising again on the third day. Sickness and death are no match for His powerful Word. So why aren't Christians miraculously healed left and right today? Why so many more miracles in the Gospels than now? The miracles in the Gospels took place for a specific reason—to prove that Jesus was the Savior. Old Testament prophecies, such as Isaiah 35, declared that miracles would accompany the Messiah. When Jesus came, He worked miracles—proving Himself to be the Christ. He's made the case—there's no more proof needed. To believe in Him, we don't need to witness such miracles ourselves, because we hear about them in His Word—His Word that He still speaks with authority.

Nevertheless, it is true that Jesus has authority over sickness and death. The problem is that you will be tempted to believe that He must exercise that authority right now, on your schedule, to prove that He is the Savior. But the Lord often works through weakness to save—

there is no better example of that than the cross; and so He will also permit sickness in your life, too—and He will permit it to stay for a while. But this does not mean He is powerless or faithless. He did not heal everyone who was sick during His ministry, yet those He healed fulfilled the prophecies. Those whom He did heal had been afflicted for a long time, some since birth; the fact that they were sick for a while does not negate that the Lord spoke His Word to heal them. You'll be tempted to doubt your Savior when He doesn't work on your schedule, but do not despair: though He permits suffering and affliction in this life for a while according to His wisdom and will, He will still demonstrate His authority over sickness and even death itself. He will do so on the Last Day, when He raises you up from the dead, fully healed and never to be afflicted again.

The fourth comfort is this: the purpose of Jesus remains the preaching of the Good News of the kingdom of God. He sent out His disciples to preach, and it is true that He gave them authority to heal the sick and cast out demons like He did, at least for a while; but most of all, He sent His disciples out to preach the Good News of the kingdom of God. Those who were healed of their sicknesses would eventually find themselves sick again, and those who had demons cast out still had to confront death and grave. But the Good News of the kingdom of God is better news than that: by the proclamation of Christ crucified and resurrected, it gives forgiveness of sins, eternal life and salvation. For where there is the forgiveness of sins, there is also life and salvation. The Church is always tempted to stray away from this message, for the Good News of the kingdom of God appears so humble and weak and useless against the temptations and afflictions of this life; but once again, so did the cross appear humble and weak and useless. The Church does well to remember this, because she will always be tempted to give up on the Gospel in favor of things that people consider more important and glorious—be it faith-healing, tolerance, emotional experience or whatever.

Yet Jesus came to preach the Good News of the Kingdom of God, humble though it may sound— and humble though it may appear at the font and the altar. Familiarity breeds contempt in a sinful world, so you'll be tempted as well to look past this Good News. But as a called and ordained servant of the Word of Christ, and by His authority, I tell you this: Jesus Christ became flesh to be your Savior. He has died for all of your sins. He is risen from the dead and sits at God's right hand, interceding for you. He will deliver you from every evil of body and soul, property and honor, and He promises you eternal life. That is why He came—to be Your Savior. And that is what He continues to proclaim in His authoritative Word.

Dear friends, this is the Good News of the kingdom of God. Your Savior is not far away. He is as near to you as His Word and His Sacraments. And by that Word which He proclaims with authority, He says this to you: "I forgive you all of your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." Amen