

OUT WITH THE OLD, IN WITH THE NEW!

Fourth Sunday After Epiphany

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Mark 1:21-28

And they went into Capernaum, and immediately on the Sabbath [Jesus] entered the synagogue and was teaching. And they were astonished at His teaching, for He taught them as one who had authority, and not as the scribes. And immediately there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit. And he cried 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." But 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. And they were all amazed, so that they questioned among themselves, saying, "What is this? A new teaching with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey Him." And at once His fame spread everywhere throughout all the surrounding region of Galilee.

Grace, peace and mercy from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ, amen.

In last week's Gospel lesson Jesus said **"Repent and believe the Gospel."** In our Gospel lesson today, Jesus brings that same message to Capernaum.

It's the Sabbath, Jesus immediately enters the synagogue and begins teaching; and no doubt His message is the same. The people who hear Him are astonished; they are amazed at His authority. He's not like those scribes, who spend their time quoting other scribes or rabbis quoting other rabbis. There are no quote marks in Jesus' teaching. He's not relying on the words of others, but speaks to them with direct scriptural authority.

God is there, talking to them.

Of course, words can be just words, and people do talk a lot. Despite the authority they sense, talk by itself can be cheap. But this is not the end of the amazing things for that day. A man with an unclean spirit is in the synagogue. This spirit does more than just torment the man he possesses; so this spirit lashes out against the Son of God. **"Let us alone!" it shrieks. "What have we to do with You, Jesus of Nazareth? Did you come to destroy us? I know who You are-the Holy One of God!"**

Maybe this Jesus is more than just words. Evil spirits don't like Him, and this one has just called Him the Messiah.

More miraculous is what happens next: Jesus rebukes the unclean spirit, saying, **"Be quiet, and come out of him!"** A few short, ordinary words and the evil spirit departs. Jesus chases it away with a sentence.

Those present question among themselves: **"What is this? What is this a new teaching? (Literally what is this new doctrine). For with authority He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey Him."**

Jesus speaks with authority. They said that before, but now He has more authority than they could have imagined: For He commands unclean spirits, and they're forced to obey Him.

Yet there's more, Jesus' speaking-His teaching, His doctrine-is new. Not "new" as in shiny and clean, just-out-of-the-box new; but "new" as in "completely different." As in "original." As in "We've never heard that before."

What's so new and completely different? Consider that scribes traditionally teach the Law: "Obey God's commands enough, and God will be pleased; and if God is pleased with your obedience, then He will reward you." Remember, by definition, a man with an unclean spirit isn't going to be doing God-pleasing works; he's under bondage to the devil, and all that he does is evil.

Nothing that this man does is earning God's favor; after all, the unclean spirit has just declared that he wants nothing to do with Jesus, the Son of God.

But Jesus helps him anyway. The man hasn't done any good works to earn God's favor and merit, but Jesus helps him anyway. This is why the doctrine is so new, so completely different: The man isn't delivered because of his good works. He's delivered strictly by the mercy and power of Jesus. For those raised to believe that their obedience to the Law earns God's favor, this is an amazingly new doctrine. Furthermore, this new doctrine has authority-authority to send evil spirits fleeing away.

If the people of Capernaum had put two and two together, they would be astonished again. The Jesus who said "Come out of him" to the evil spirit is the same One who has been saying, "Repent and believe the Gospel." If His Word has such authority, then His command to repent gives them the ability to do so. His command to believe the Gospel gives them the faith to believe it. He is proclaiming God's gracious favor-not by their merit, but as a free gift.

This is completely new and different from the teaching of the scribes. This Jesus is delivering people solely by His work, His mercy, not their efforts or worthiness. This is shown to be true for a possessed man in Capernaum that day. And it's true for the whole world, for you and me, when Jesus hangs on the cross and saves all by His suffering and death for our sins.

There's lots of talk in our world these days asking for something new, a departure from the same old things. It makes sense when it comes to pop culture, like music and movies. It's also true when it comes to computers and cars and other technology. You don't stay in business if you only offer the same old thing.

It's also what people want when it comes to religion: People want something new.

Scholars say that we live in a post-Christian world. Christianity has had its day, has run its course; it's old, feeble, fading fast. Certainly, people are turning to other religions at an astonishing rate-either well-known, established religions or experiments in personal spirituality. They want something new.

But are they really new? Most false religions are hardly 21st century new. One of the fastest growing religions in America today is Islam, but not a new religion at all. It's not changing either; mess with the Koran and you're out probably dead.

Other alternatives aren't new religions at all either; they are old, old heresies with a fresh coat of paint. In a survey of people today, few would say that they practice paganism, Gnosticism, Arianism, Anomoeanism, Enthusiasm or Pharisaism today. But they do: These religions and philosophies go by new names like New Age, Mormonism, Jehovah's Witnesses, Moral Relativism, Eastern Meditation or something else. The name might be recent, but the teachings are nothing new at all.

These alternatives to Christianity have many and various teachings and faces, but all share one thing in common: They are all religions of the law. In other words, every last one of them teaches that you win salvation or divine favor by your work, your meditation or your efforts. It's up to you to save yourself. That's not new. That's an old, ancient, pathetic, dead doctrine of self works. It's been around since Genesis 3, and it hasn't saved anyone yet.

Given these facts, one will soon realize that people aren't so much attracted to new, innovative religions. It seems that, in their sinful state, they are repelled by the Gospel and would rather believe in anything but the death of Jesus for their free salvation.

Within Christianity, many call for something new as well. We should have new worship to keep up with the times and people. We should adopt new doctrinal practices to become more open and tolerant. We must imagine a new vision for reaching out to those around us. At one of our pastoral conferences it was proposed that our doctrine and practice is the product of the single-minded,

educated Europeans, and we need to innovate. We should be quick to argue that our doctrine and practice is derived solely from Scripture and cannot be refuted by the same. But this argument seems to fall on deaf ears these days. To be an effective, dynamic church (whatever that means), we are told that we need to do something new.

Yet, in the middle of all of this, we gather here for worship. We sing hymns some several hundred years old. We speak creeds that go back more than a millennia and a half; we sing a liturgy that goes back even farther, let me add, it wasn't created by educated Europeans. We read Scripture lessons that make those creeds and liturgy look young. And with all of this, we proclaim the same basic message of sin and grace. You heard it last week. You're hearing it now. God willing, you'll hear it again next Sunday.

The world would determine that, in all of this, we are saying nothing new. And the world is wrong. Each Sunday, we proclaim in this world a new doctrine with authority.

It's new and "completely different." As we noted before, every other religion on earth is of law-you earn God's favor by the works you do. We proclaim a new, completely-different message to this dying world: You are saved from your sin by the work of Jesus Christ alone. He has redeemed you from sin and death by His cross. He is risen again and freely offers you forgiveness and salvation in His means of grace.

It's new, and it's doctrine. It's His word. This is how God reveals Himself to you-how He declares His love, His sacrifice and His plan of your salvation. He doesn't reveal His Gospel through feelings, like a burning in the bosom or extreme emotions or through inner thoughts and experience; He tells you with specific words that you are forgiven for the sake of His suffering and death.

It's new. It's doctrine. And it's with authority. This doctrine is the doctrine of God-it's His Word! And when God speaks, things happen. Consider creation, the Lord created all things by speaking. Consider the Gospel lesson today, where Jesus sent an unclean spirit packing by speaking His Word. God's Word has power; it has authority. It does what it says. By the Law of God which we proclaim, the Holy Spirit is at work to convict you of your sin. By the Gospel of God which we proclaim, the Holy Spirit is giving you forgiveness, working faith in you. God is at work for your salvation in His Word.

But not so with other religions, each one tells you to work your way to heaven. Sometimes they point to their made-up words and doctrines; sometimes they tell you to find it all within yourself. Either way, such teachings do not have God's authority. If you change the message from the Word of God, it's not His message anymore. If it's not His message, He isn't working through it. Other messages may attract more numbers of followers, but they don't have God's authority to save; they only lead followers to eternal destruction.

Today, here, we proclaim a new doctrine with authority.

It may not sound new to you and me, because we've heard it time and time again. What should be our response to such repetition? Utter thankfulness and joy! Yes, rejoice because the Lord continues to shower His message of salvation upon you. Throughout the world, most never hear the pure Gospel, if any gospel at all; yet the Lord sees fit to bless you with this message of Christ and His cross week after week. You are blessed!

To you this day, is proclaimed this new doctrine with authority, that Jesus Christ has died on the cross to redeem you. With that Word, the Lord declares to you the forgiveness of sins. He sends the devil scurrying away. He gives you His Word that He will use all things to your good, and that He will deliver you from this sinful world to life everlasting.

So rejoice dear brothers and sisters to hear it once again, this new doctrine which gives you new life: For through Christ Jesus all your sins are forgiven in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. In Jesus name, Amen and amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. AMEN!