

Fourth Sunday after Epiphany

Mark 1:21-28

When Jesus entered the synagogue at Capernaum, He caused an immediate uproar. Unlike other teachers in the synagogue, Jesus taught without citing supporting opinions to strengthen His own views. He taught directly, as though He were God Himself. Those hearing Him wondered if He could be more than just another guest speaker. He sounded wise, but perhaps He was just an arrogant trickster. God answered their doubt by demonstrating Jesus' authority.

A demon who possessed a man in the place of worship spoke directly to Jesus. Jesus silenced the demon and freed the man who had been possessed. Though it was well known that only God had such power over evil, this Jesus of Nazareth had spoken directly to the demon, citing no authority other than His own.

Jesus crushed the power of evil. The demon could no longer torment the man because his evil power had been silenced by the presence and authority of Jesus. Jesus had rescued the man from no less than the power of Satan.

Jesus has also rescued us from the power of Satan. His death on the cross paid for the sin that possessed us from the beginning of our lives. In baptism each of us receives the fantastic gift of eternal life. The Holy Spirit resides in us, directing and enabling us to be more like our Lord. We cannot be tormented by invading demons. Contrary to Hollywood movies, God's power always overcomes evil.

As Christians, freed from Satan's power, we are free to follow Jesus every day. Though saints, we are still sinners, so we cannot follow Him perfectly, but we are no longer slaves to evil. Jesus has restored us to Himself, freeing us to share His love with all those around us. We are His messengers. He sends us out with the wonderful news of salvation to people who are still in bondage.

Is your Bible wearing out from use, or is it in storage?

(A message from your Iowa District West Christian Education Committee)

Fourth Sunday after Epiphany

Mark 1:21-28

1. Using the Concordia Self-study Bible or another reference, find out about the synagogue (vs. 21) setting. Where were they found? Who could belong? What happened in a synagogue?
2. Jesus acted with "authority" (vs. 22; 27). Where did He get His authority? How did His authority impact His message and ministry? Was His authority always respected?
3. What title (vs. 24) does the evil spirit give to Jesus? What is the significance of that title?
4. What impact did this miracle have on Jesus' early ministry?

For Family Reflection

5. What evil influences try to distract you from the things of Jesus? Where do we get the authority to quiet those evil influences?
6. The people were amazed with Jesus' power. What about Jesus amazes you? What amazing message about Jesus do you have to share with others?

Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany

Mark 1:29-39

Jesus had shown His authority over demons in the synagogue of Capernaum. He continued to show His authority over all things by healing Peter's mother-in-law and others. Upon hearing about these great miracles, large crowds began to follow Him. His life was filled with long days and hard work. Mark says that "in the early morning, while it was still dark..." Jesus went out alone to pray. He made room in His life for what we often think of as "quiet time." However, we rarely experience quiet times ourselves.

Note that Jesus wanted to be alone in order to share time with His Father. Have you ever needed to be alone with God? Are there times when you are tired, perhaps over-committed, or just too busy, but you feel that it just isn't right for you to take time out to be alone with God? Would you feel guilty for taking time out for your own needs?

Jesus is the only person (remember that He was True Man as well as True God) to ever live a perfect life, yet He needed time alone with His Father. His divinity did not lessen that need. His disciples needed Him, as did the crowds who hungered to hear Him, but there were times when He declined to be helping them because He needed to be alone and with God.

If Jesus took time to rest and to be with His Father, how much more do we need to take time to be in God's presence—in His word and in prayer? Our days are hectic, and loved ones and not-so-loved ones demand our time. But, to deny ourselves time with God is not unselfish, it is unwise. We are His children. He is our Strength, our Redeemer, and our Peace. He enables us to serve others. Without time with Him, we will soon be of little use or joy to anyone.

Ask God for time to be with Him. Pursue that time. Prioritize that time. Schedule that time. Be with your Father.

Join a regular Bible study—it will strengthen your life!

(A message from your Iowa District West Christian Education Committee)

Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany

Mark 1:29-39

1. What insights about Peter and his family do we get from this text? What disciples (Jesus' traveling partners in these stories) did Jesus especially consider as His "family"?
2. The disciples observe, "Everyone is looking for you" (vs. 37) What were people looking for from Jesus? What are people looking for from Jesus today?
3. What did the demons (vs. 34) know about Jesus? Could their knowledge save them?
4. What do we learn about Jesus' prayer life from vs. 35? What other times in Jesus' life do we find Him in prayer?

For Family Reflection

5. What times and places for prayer do you set aside? What distracts you from prayer time? What assists you in making prayer a priority?
6. Jesus went to nearby villages to preach and teach (vs. 38). The Epiphany season is a season of sharing the Good News of Jesus with those close to us and those far away. To whom is Jesus sending you?

Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany

Mark 1:40-45

As they walked through the countryside, lepers were required by religious law to shout to everyone that they were “unclean.” One such man, though he knew that everyone would shun him, perhaps even run from him, persisted in trying to see Jesus. He was sure that Jesus could heal what no one else could. Jesus reached out and touched the disease-ridden man.

In those days Jews believed that leprosy was a curse from God. Not only was the afflicted person a victim of the disease, he also found himself cast out of his society and religion. Yet this man, who had not known compassion, sought it from Jesus. God, in His mercy, gave the leper the courage to hope and the strength to approach the Savior.

The Pharisees only wanted to believe in God’s judgment. They believed that this sinner must have been guilty of a great offence to deserve such a punishment from the Almighty. They refused to believe in God’s loving mercy. The Pharisees offered no hope to the leper or to any sinner. “Be perfect” was the only advice they would offer. Not recognizing God’s grace, it was the only advice they could offer. They let the leper face death believing that he was cursed by God.

Through this leper, Jesus proclaimed God’s mercy toward us all. He does not turn His back on the sinner. He pursues the sinner with His love. Jesus brought the leper healing (astounding the Pharisees who believed that only God could heal leprosy).

As Christians, we follow a Lord who has personally paid the price for the sins of us all through His death. Just as He cleansed the leper, he cleanses us through His mercy, saving us from God’s anger. We offer nothing toward our salvation. It isn’t a “pay-as-you-go” deal. Jesus has done it all. We are now owned by Him, called to His service, and blessed by His kindness.

We learn how to witness to our foes through the study of God’s Word!
(A message from your Iowa District West Christian Education Committee)

Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany

Mark 1:40-45

1. Find out about leprosy. Why was it such a concern for people in Jesus’ day? Review the Old Testament “rules” about the disease in Leviticus 13-14.
2. What do we learn about Jesus’ compassion from this miracle? What do we learn about Jesus’ power?
3. What directive did Jesus give to the healed man? (44) Did the man following Jesus’ direction? How did this complicate Jesus’ ministry?

For Family Reflection

4. If you could have Jesus’ healing touch (vs. 41) reach out to someone, whom would you want Him to heal?
5. The man went and talked freely (vs. 45) about Jesus. Why don’t we talk more freely about Jesus and His power in our lives?
6. The first chapter of the Gospel of Mark has lots of action. Review the variety of interactions that Jesus had with people. What did you learn about Jesus in this chapter?

Transfiguration of our Lord

Mark 9:2-9

Christians often refer to mountaintop experiences, meaning that some event in life has been extraordinary in its feeling of joy and strength. Peter, James, and John remembered their day on the mountaintop for the rest of their lives. Peter wrote many years later, "...we were eyewitnesses of His majesty...when we were with Him on the holy mountain." Why the mountain experience—the Transfiguration? Why this special witness to the disciples? They needed to understand.

The disciples sometimes seemed unclear as to Jesus' purpose and identity. Their absolute assurance of the truth came after the Resurrection. Before Jesus' arrest we often find them asking questions to which we, being Christians after the Cross, already know the answers. How often do we read the words, "they did not understand," referring to the disciples? Even after the Resurrection they were still confused, asking Him if it was time to restore the kingdom to Israel. In a wonderful example of the patient love of God, Jesus replied to them, "...you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses...." He made these very imperfect men His ambassadors to the world. He loved and cared for them and blessed them with the gift of eternal life with Him. He allowed Peter, James, and John to see Him in the presence of God on the mountaintop, glorified by His Father. And still they did not really get it.

The disciples are difficult to figure out. How could they be so much like we are and still be so usable by God? The answer is that they lived life by God's grace instead of their own power. They trusted Him to provide the mountain tops and to enable them in the valleys. Jesus desires to give us the joy of knowing His power in our lives, day by day and mountaintop by mountaintop.

Been to Bible study lately? It's never too late to start.

(A message from your Iowa District West Christian Education Committee)

Transfiguration of our Lord

Mark 9:2-9

1. Mark's account of the Transfiguration is a classic news story. Where did the Transfiguration take place?
2. Who was with Jesus at the Transfiguration? Which disciples were there? Which Old Testament heroes were there? Why would they have been chosen?
3. When in Jesus' ministry did the Transfiguration take place? What is the significance of this timing? When in the church year calendar is this incident remembered? What is the significance of this timing?
4. Why is Jesus transfigured? Why is this an important event in Jesus' life? Why is it important for us to remember His transfiguration?

For Family Reflection

5. Jesus transfiguration is also shared in the Gospels of Matthew (Matthew 17:1-13) and Luke (Luke 9:28-36). Read the story in these other Gospels. Compare the details that are reported.
6. The Epiphany season began with Jesus' baptism and concludes with Jesus' transfiguration. What similar announcement was made at both settings? What do you know about Jesus from these stories (and other Gospel stories of the past weeks)?