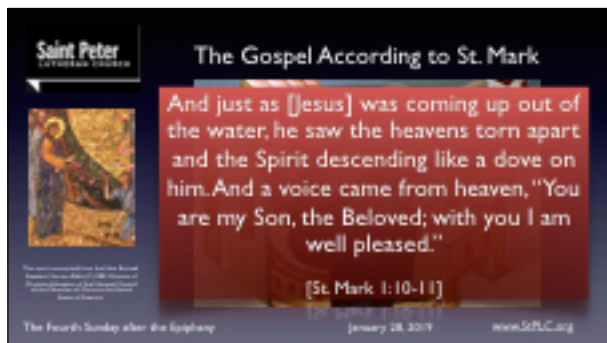


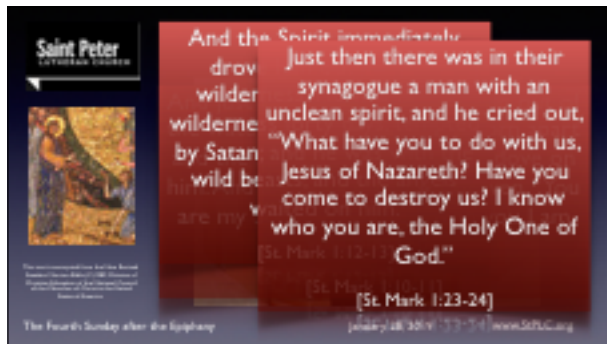
Jesus rebuked [the unclean spirit], saying, “Be silent, and come out of him!” And the unclean spirit, convulsing [the man] and crying with a loud voice, came out of him. I’ve tried so hard to picture this scene in my mind this past week — what it was like in the synagogue that day. I’ve looked at dozens of depictions that artists have created. I’ve tried to imagine what it must have been like for that man, or for his neighbors. And, frankly, I don’t find myself wishing I had been there.

Oh, there are moments in Jesus’ life I would love to have witnessed. When he healed a child. When he fed a crowd. When he brought Lazarus back from death. When he schooled the Pharisees. When he met with his followers after the resurrection. But this scene — not so much. The whole notion of demons possessing humans and destroying their lives troubles me. I prefer to think of this as an ancient and primitive way of



But this way of thinking makes it hard to reckon with St. Mark’s Gospel. You can’t take St. Mark seriously, without taking seriously the forces of evil that oppose God. His is, in large part, a very spiritual Gospel account.

It starts from the very beginning. At the baptism of Jesus, the heavens are torn apart. We’re not talking about a door that is easily opened and closed. The Spirit doesn’t gently leave the clouds, only to return some time later. In Mark’s Gospel, it is a violent tearing in the heavens. In a first century way of thinking, the dome that sets a boundary between the spiritual realm and the physical realm is breeched, and it can never be repaired. The spirits are loose now: both evil spirits and the Holy Spirit. A battle between good and evil on earth is underway.



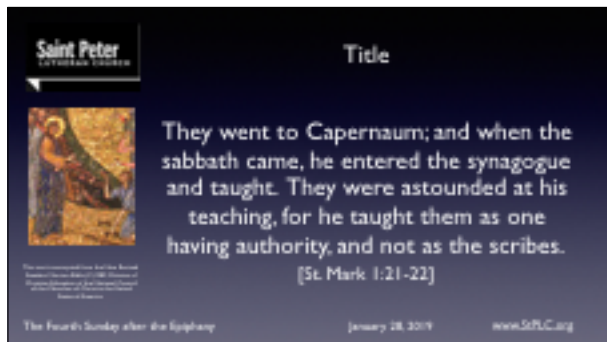
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The presence of spirits is constant in St. Mark's Gospel. At his baptism, the Spirit descends on Jesus, and a voice declares him to be God's son, the beloved.

Directly following his baptism, Jesus is driven by the Spirit (we assume: the Holy Spirit) into the wilderness for a time of testing.

And the first thing that takes place after calling the disciples is that Jesus is, here, confronted by unclean spirits.

There is a tendency among students of the Bible to exegete the meaning of these spirits in St. Mark. Is some of what they experienced in the first century physical illness that medical specialists now address? Or mental health issues that we address these days with therapists and medicine?

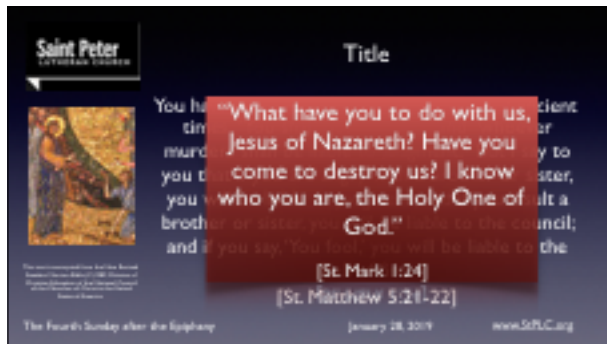


4

This may or may not be the case. But the truth is: a better way to work with this story would be to start with the beginning. Jesus calls four disciples: Simon & Andrew; James & John. They make their way to Capernaum. This is the very first public appearance of Jesus in St. Mark. The people are immediately impressed. In fact, Mark describes them as astounded at the way Jesus taught.

In the Jewish tradition, there is a particular way of teaching that many rabbis adopt. They study the Scriptures, and they also study what the great masters have taught. A typical lesson might include comments about the Bible passage, and then information about how God's people have reflected on these passages over the years. Rabbi So-and-so says this... And Rabbi So-and-so says that...

It becomes a lesson on the passage, and also a lesson on how the best of their teachers have understood and taught about



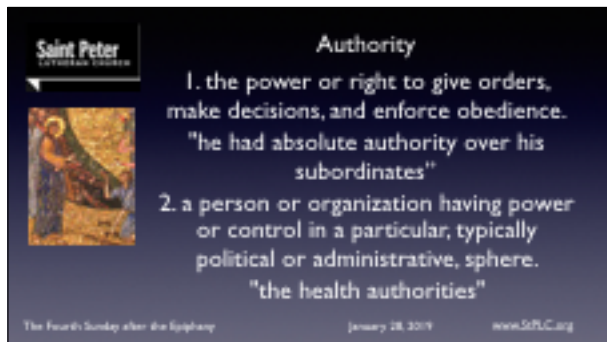
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Jesus doesn't teach like the others taught. He doesn't remind his listeners of what sages of old had to say about the Scriptures. He doesn't operate out of any else's authority. He speaks with his own authority. Interpreting these passages, yes. And then re-interpreting them so that they have even more impact on the listener.

The Scriptures may prohibit murder, but Jesus declares that even if you murder someone a bit at a time — holding anger against them — insulting them — calling them names — you are guilty of having broken the fifth commandment. This kind of teaching astounds the people. They are struck by the authority with which he speaks.

Not only are his listeners struck by this — so too are the unclean spirits. They come face-to-face with Jesus, and are afraid that he might destroy them.

“What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth?”



6

So if there is a question at the heart of this Gospel lesson, it is not how to understand these unclean spirits — or what, in our experience, might be similar to them. The question, instead, is what kind of authority does Jesus have with us? The spirits are afraid of him. The people astounded.

How do we respond to the authority of his message in our own lives? Do we allow him to give us orders? Do we obey his word? Do we see in him not only a source of God's grace, but also a source of God's leading and guiding?



We've heard a lot about siloing these days. It is easy now, when we can choose our news sources, when we can shape our social media streams, when we can listen to our favorite commentators — it is easy to live within a silo, where we only hear what agrees with us, and where we can ignore any other points of view. And, frankly, where we can look with disdain on anyone who disagrees with us.

It is tempting to do this, also, with the teachings of Jesus. When he speaks words that support our preconceived notions, our established ways of thinking, we celebrate it, receive it gladly — we may even memorize those passages! But when his message is one that challenges us — causes us to see the world from a different perspective — calls us to identify the sin within us, and the way it has shaped our thinking — we can find ourselves misconstruing his message, ignoring it altogether, or



Today's text introduces us to people who could easily have done this, but they don't. Instead, they choose to follow Jesus.

Allowing his word to have authority in their lives. Subjecting their own prejudices and preferences to his wisdom. Responding not by becoming angry and rejecting him, as so many others will in this story. But, instead, being astounded by his teaching, and the authority behind his message. Embracing his teaching, genuinely, and allowing it to change them, and shape them, and cause them to become something they never could have been on their own.

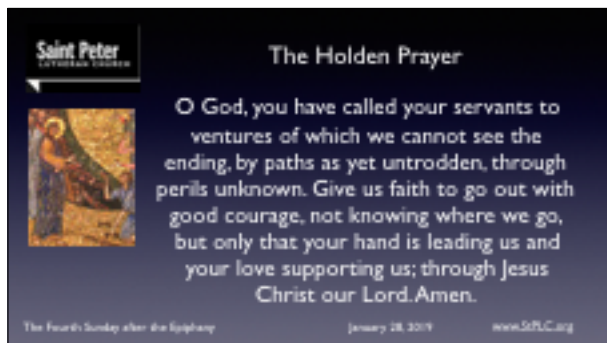


This is something that we Lutherans, of all people, should find familiar.

Five hundred years ago, there were many who rejected out of hand what Martin Luther had to say. It didn't fit with how they saw things. They had siloed themselves in their own religious perspectives. They couldn't see what he had rediscovered in the Gospel, and so they fought against him with all of their might.

But there were others who embraced his message. Who returned, with him, to a grace-centered message of Christ. Who confessed, with him, their shortcomings, and prayed for God's mercy. Who reformed the way they thought, and the way they practiced their faith, even when it came to giving up some of their most cherished traditions.

As they, with Luther, gave Christ more authority over their lives and their faith practices, their hopes were deepened, their spirits were revived, and their resolve strengthened to follow Christ in



We Lutherans continue to think of ourselves as a reforming movement. We don't imagine that we somehow got it all right in the sixteenth century, and are now just fine. We don't lift up some golden age of church life — say the late 1950s — and insist that this is was the golden age of church practice. But, instead, we remember that we are as likely to go astray as any others, and need still to measure our practices and preferences against what Christ teaches us.

We may not know where this kind of faithfulness is going to lead us, but we trust that we don't go the journey alone. In the words of what some have come to call "The Holden Prayer" we pray together:

O God, you have called your servants to ventures of which we cannot see the ending, by paths as yet untrodden, through perils unknown. Give us faith to go out with good courage, not knowing where we go, but only that your hand is leading us and



11

When Jesus spoke at the synagogue, the people in Capernaum were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes.

When he acted, they were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, "What is this? A new teaching—with authority!"


What kind of authority will Jesus have in our lives? I am hopeful that we will respond like those people in Capernaum did. And I am confident that it will lead us to lives that make witness to his power and authority.




12

As you leave today, our hosts have a devotional tool for you. Let's take some time to reflect on the words of this week's Gospel lesson, and explore how it might lead us to a new and deeper faithfulness.

13



Saint Peter
CATHEDRAL



The Last Word

Take up the cross and follow me,
I heard the Master say.
I gave my life to ransom thee,
Surrender your all today.
Wherever he leads I'll go.
I'll follow my Christ who loves me so.


[Baylus Benjamin McKinney (1936)]

The Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany January 28, 2018 www.SPC.org


American Singer–Songwriter Baylus Benjamin McKinney, from south Webster Parish, Louisiana, gets the last word today. In 1936 he wrote what became a very popular hymn in those days: “Wherever he leads, I’ll go.”

Take up the cross and follow me,
I heard the Master say.
I gave my life to ransom thee,
Surrender your all today.
Wherever he leads I’ll go.
Wherever he leads I’ll go.
I’ll follow my Christ who loves me so.
Wherever he leads I’ll go.

14



Saint Peter
CATHEDRAL



Hymn of the Day

Please stand as we sing today's
Hymn of the Day.

1st Service: Word of God,
Come Down on Earth
(page #29)

2nd Service: Trading My Sorrows
(page #38)

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Please stand with us as we sing today’s Hymn of the Day.


1st Service: Word of God, Come Down on Earth
(page #29)

2nd Service: Trading My Sorrows
(page #38)

15

Saint Peter
LUTHERAN LITURGY

St. Mark 1:21-28



1:21 They went to Capernaum; and when the sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught. 22 They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes. 23 Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, 24 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."

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16

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St. Mark 1:21-28



25 But Jesus rebuked him, saying, "Be silent, and come out of him!" 26 And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him. 27 They were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, "What is this? A new teaching-with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him." 28 At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.

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