

We sometimes refer to the Epiphany season as the flip side of Christmas. That is to say, at Christmas God's gift of love is revealed in the Christ Child; in the Epiphany season the Christ reveals himself to the nations.

Thus far in the Epiphany Season, Jesus has been revealed as King of the Jews, Son of God, Lamb of God, Messiah, a preacher, and one who calls disciples. In today's Gospel reading from Mark, Jesus is presented as **teacher** and **exorcist**.

They went to Capernaum; and when the Sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught. They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority... and then, Jesus rebuked [the] unclean spirit, saying, 'Be silent, and come out of him!'

In all the Gospels Jesus is a teacher; in all, except John, Jesus is seen as an exorcist. But for Mark, portraying him as exorcist is *centrally* important.

Not because exorcism of demons made Jesus unique. Other exorcists were, and, in some places, still are at work. (At Thursday Bible Study we remembered the murder case in Stanford Memorial Chapel and that there was performed a public exorcism of the evil spirit and a ritual cleansing of that space).

What is unique for Mark is the context of the exorcism. This first striking example expelling of spirits, *comes as Jesus is teaching*. The hearers are moved by the authority and power of what he says.

And, though we don't know the content of the teaching at this point (that comes in Ch. 4), for Mark the emphasis is on the sheer power of Jesus' teaching!

You remember that John the Baptist said just a few verses earlier in this first chapter, ***The one more powerful than I is coming after me***. And Jesus himself referred to his mission as entering Satan's house and binding him.

In Mark, Jesus, is the strong Son of God who has come to overthrow the power of Satan, of evil. Mark believes that Jesus is the Great Exorcist, the powerful one who has entered a world in which the forces of evil (Satan and demons) are crippling, alienating, distorting, and destroying life.

In that urban synagogue, is the clash of titans: one for good (for healing and integration) and one for evil (confusion and disintegration). On an ordinary Sabbath day, Mark portrays this cosmic struggle between the authority of God and the force of Satan.

Sometimes these days it seems that God is losing this battle. We read and see or experience, almost daily, the sad, tragic scenes where “unclean spirits” have gained the upper hand in people of every stripe and status.

The unclean spirits of ignorance, arrogance, fear, hatred, greed, vengeance, to name a few, still rear their ugly heads attempting to grip the hearts and minds of people everywhere, confusing them, possessing them, shattering lives and relationships.

And so with us, in this sanctuary, on an ordinary Sabbath day, in this urban metropolis. Will we, you and I, yield to the lesser spirits that bring on confusion and disintegration within us?

Will we yield to the lesser spirits that would, as Martin Luther puts it, “wrest the Kingdom from [God’s] Son and set at naught all he has done”? Will we forget who we are and whose we are?

Or will we remember the name in which we were baptized and in that name find our healing and strength, and claim the greater spirit within?

Let us, at the beginning of this new year, as individuals and as congregation, hold fast to the Spirit of God whose compassionate grace and steadfast love has been poured into us for our well-being. The familiar words of affirmation must come repeatedly to our lips, **“I will and I ask God to help and guide me.”**

We have a mighty task as we ***Live, Grow, and Serve*** in this part of the metropolis we call home. We are here to give voice to the Spirit of God within us and to bring the good news of life and love with the urgency and immediacy of Mark.

Come, share at Christ’s table, remember his name, and be renewed with his Spirit in this holy sacrament for the days ahead.