

Mark 1:21–28

James Nestingen · CROSS Talk

Taught for the Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany, Year B (Revised Common Lectionary) · 24 January 2012

My friends, when you see this I'll have been in Ethiopia for several days, not quite a week but approaching it, and I'll have had several classes with my students over there. It's fun to think about where you are and where I'll be. I'm going to be teaching Reformation history, and they also want me to teach philosophy, which I have never taught in my life, so I'm going to have an adventure with that. I think I'll teach them everything that's wrong with philosophy, so that I wreck it for anybody who comes after. No, no. But I'm not going to make any concessions: "Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified." So we'll do that, and we'll see how it goes.

Anyway, we have the Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany coming up, and so, a day late and a dollar early, I'm going to give you those texts, and then tomorrow we'll do the texts for the Third Sunday after the Epiphany. We'll get a little mixed up, but we'll have it right for your preparation for preaching.

The Gospel Works Backward

One of the chief characteristics of the gospel is the way it exposes the powers that contend against it. In effect, the gospel works backward. Ordinarily we think: problem, solution; need, fulfillment of need. There is a whole Gestalt school based on the assumption that we become aware of what we are looking for, and then we go looking for it. But even in common experience we recognize the difference. We hear people say things like, "I didn't realize how sick I was until I got better." At the time of the illness, even when the suffering was quite deep, the true degree of the plight didn't quite show. It was afterward, in hindsight, that the person could see how bad things had really gotten.

We also say something like this: the closer you get to the light, the more you see. When you are away from the light, in the shade or in the darkness, where the light is evident but not really penetrating, you see a little. When you get closer to the light, you begin to see in deeper

dimensions. And so, when Christ, the light of the world, made manifest in this season of light, the light show of Epiphany, shows up and turns on the light, we begin to see.

The gospel is like that. It is an alien word. It comes out of nowhere. It has a life of its own. It can never be assumed or taken for granted. It is slippery, elusive. It turns on you just as quickly as you begin to think you've got hold of it. And so the gospel comes in its alien way, like a passing downpour of rain, as Luther used to speak of it. And when the gospel comes, it shows us what's out there. We begin to see the powers surrounding us, the real context in which we live, and we get a deeper and deeper sense of everything Christ has delivered us from.

There is good reason for this. In the *Fourteen Consolations*, one of my favorite writings of Luther, he goes through and gives thanks with fourteen consoling thoughts, and one of them is pretty close to what I've been saying: we never become fully aware of our need until God has met it. If we saw everything we needed, if we realized how bad it is, we would get desperate and lose hope altogether. Another of his consoling thoughts is that we never really realize what great sinners we are until grace comes. Then we begin to see that in fact we have use for Christ's death and resurrection, and need it desperately.

So each of the texts for Epiphany 4 has this characteristic: it is lighting something up. It shows us some particular dimension of our situation. It exposes where we stand at the present time, but exposes it in such a way that help is there before we are aware we need help, so that the gift is being given even before we know we need it.

The supporting texts are a lot of fun. In Deuteronomy 18 Moses describes the prophet who will succeed him. We are in a situation where we need prophets, people who can see beyond the limits of our sight, who can see what the hardness of our own flesh, our lostness, and our own desires prevent us from seeing. So a prophet must come, and we have to be able to discern a real prophet from a false one. At the same time, 1 Corinthians 8 deals with the power of idols. They are a lot trickier to deal with than we generally think. We speak as though we could shuck them off like barnacles. In fact idols have a life of their own and a power of their own.

And then we come to the psalm: "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom." We do not relate to God as buddies, as coequal powers: you show me yours and I'll show you mine. We relate to God as the one who is far above us. So the beginning of wisdom is not an act of will

or some palsy-walsy introduction, but the fear of God. That is the context in which we live, where God becomes our adversary as well as our Redeemer. I really don't think you can know the gospel until you know that. When you have been stalked and hunted, and in the night you realize that the one after you is not tame but the good Lord himself, then the gospel has an awesome sound, I'll tell you.

So we'll look at these supporting texts, and then we get this fabulous gospel. We've been sitting in the first chapter of Mark all month long, it seems, and now we get Jesus speaking with authority, and we get him delivering his first demoniac from the power of the evil one. That's probably a little shocking in suburbia. It's bad enough that the Elks Club wants you to join, but now we've got some hairy thing coming down on you in the night. I shouldn't joke, should I? We'd better talk about that.

A Prophet Like Moses: Deuteronomy 18

First of all, Deuteronomy 18:15–20 addresses Israel's anxiety concerning the death of Moses. They are wondering where they are going to be able to turn. Moses has been a pain in the backside, but he has also delivered. He's been good. And given Moses' stammering, you have to have Aaron around. Then they have this sister, Miriam, who is a lot better than the menfolk in Deuteronomy want to admit. She was fabulous; without Miriam there wouldn't be much of a story here. But of course Miriam, in the casual sexism of the time, drifts into the background. The last time I was in Ethiopia, the Oromo people welcomed our whole little cadre with a big dance, and there was a woman singing Miriam's song. She just about flew, and it was a nearly perfect exegesis of that great song of Miriam. What fun.

We live in a context where there are lots of mysteries out there, the future in particular, and with those mysteries we are not altogether sure. We need a prophet, someone who speaks in God's name. The people of Israel are worried because they can see that Moses is ready to retire, gather in his pension from whatever source it might come, and sit it out, or more likely be gathered into God's arms. So Moses assures them that God will send a prophet, and not just any prophet either, but a prophet who will speak in God's name. That's the critical thing. There are, of course, other prophets, self-designated types, who are eager to speak and see the claim to prophecy as granting them influence. All kinds of people are willing to volunteer in God's name, particularly if you have a checkbook. But what makes a prophet a prophet is the word of the Lord.

There is lots of cheap prophecy. One of my great memories: I was preaching down in Milwaukee one time, and I had been reading Emil Fackenheim, a great Jewish thinker, on the end of prophecy. The Jews believed that prophecy ended after the great prophets of the Old Testament, that there have been no prophets since. So I talked about that in my sermon, and clearly the pastor was quite offended, because he considered himself a prophet. So in the prayers my sermon was refuted. I always love it when that happens: “God, we thank you that you have continued to send prophets.” And I said to myself, so it goes. I’m a prophet because I’m a Democrat serving a congregation of Republicans, or because I have radical social opinions? That’s not what qualifies. What qualifies is God’s word. Let the prophets say, let the preachers say, “Thus says the Lord.” That’s everything.

And so prophecy has to be tested. One way it can be tested is this: as Moses suggests, it is plain antithetical to everything else we are convinced of. When you hear God’s word, it is not necessarily an endorsement. It comes against you and exposes what is false in you. God’s word is confrontational in that sense, just as it is comforting in the gospel. The test of a prophet is whether the word is true or not, and the truth, as Moses speaks of it here, is external: Does it happen? Does it have any reality to it? Does it actually get legs and carry on? That’s the test.

So we are in a context where we need a prophet. We are in a context where God has promised the prophet. And we are in a context where prophets have to be checked; we have to find an ID, because of course any number of people are willing to exploit the claim. The fact that Moses came, that we got other prophets after Moses, that Christ Jesus became our prophet even as he became the promise of the gospel, illustrates that even before we know what we need, Christ Jesus, the triune God, has fulfilled his promise.

Mindful of His Covenant: Psalm 111

Psalm 111 focuses on the works of God, and this is a lot of fun: the goodness of God’s works. Verses 4 and 5 point out how this truth can be seen. “He provides food for those who fear him; he is ever mindful of his covenant.” This is his goodness: that as our Creator he continues to care for us, to provide food and clothing, home and family, daily work, and everything else we need to live from day to day, as Luther says.

At the same time, and more importantly, he doesn’t forget. He remembered Noah, even when he was forgetting everything else. He remembered Abraham and Sarah. He remembered his promise to the people of Israel. He remembers our baptisms. He remembers us in Christ. His

goodness is that he is mindful of his promises, of the commitments he has made: not like us, “I’ll do it tomorrow,” but like Christ Jesus himself. His word is reliable.

And because God is known by these works, by these promises, the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. The God of Scripture is a little wild, unpredictable. You never quite know what he is going to do next. But you can be sure of this: he keeps his promise. This is one of the great arguments in Wolfhart Pannenberg’s book on the Apostles’ Creed, which is very helpful. The God of Scripture can and will do anything; you never know what’s going to happen next. But you know this: he keeps his promises, and so you can count on God. That is the fear of God: to hold to the promise as the promise holds you.

Food Offered to Idols: 1 Corinthians 8

1 Corinthians 8:1–13 is the apostle Paul’s lovely discussion of food sacrificed to idols. You can hear the debate in the congregation. It was the custom in Greco-Roman society that the gods were public. There were all kinds of them; you could take your pick, and sacrifices were made. That is characteristic of idolatry: sacrifices are made to appease. The God who raised Jesus from the dead doesn’t particularly care for sacrifices: “I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies.” The idols like it, because of course priestcraft depends on sacrifice.

So there are people in Greco-Roman society feeding the idols. They leave food, and that food is used by the priests, either consumed or merchandised at relatively cheaper prices. You can get a deal on food sacrificed to idols. You can get it for free, or at a lower price, and of course that’s enough to tempt anybody. It’s good meat. The gods don’t want any cheap stuff offered; they want the best stuff, the hindquarters, the best cuts. Not just ground steak but filet mignon, the real stuff. And it’s sitting there, available.

And there are Christians who are poor, of course, and hungry, who are eating this stuff and invoking the freedom of the gospel. “The idols don’t exist anyway. What’s the big deal? You’re not stealing food. You’re not taking food out of anybody’s belly. It’s just sitting there, and because the idols don’t exist, it doesn’t matter.” So it appears you can get a free lunch with no strings attached. Whenever you get that conviction, you had better be careful, because one of the truisms is that there is no free lunch. As soon as you think you’ve got one, the bill shows up.

The problem here is that there are the weak in conscience, who are offended by this, who assume that by eating meat sacrificed to idols you have been joined to the idol. That's one of the basic assumptions of human life: you eat with those you like. It's only Christ Jesus who prepares a table in the presence of his enemies. Everybody else keeps an enemies list to make sure they don't get invited. So if you start eating food sacrificed to idols, you are joining them; that's one argument. And you are holding fellowship with sinners; that's another. You can start making all kinds of arguments. So there are a lot of people very much offended by this practice.

The Corinthian community is one of the really offensive communities in the whole history of the Christian church. If you put on your mobility forms that you served three years in Corinth, you probably wouldn't get another call. The bishop would say, "The hell you say." Only bishops can get by with that. Anyway, it is dividing the congregation. The free are rejoicing in their freedom and helping themselves, and the pious are offended. So the apostle Paul cuts the baby in half, or makes a Solomonic decision here. You are free to eat meat sacrificed to idols, but you are not free to offend your neighbor's conscience. Your neighbor is one to whom you are joined in Christ Jesus, and your neighbor, as one to whom you are joined, deserves your consideration.

Much would have been gained if this passage had been read a couple of years ago, but at that time the issue wasn't the freedom of the gospel. The issue was the freedom of the flesh. When you make desire a standard for measuring people's character, you can get pretty much anything you want. When you make the old Adam an ethical standard, you open a door that really can't be closed. So once again the neighbor becomes the standard, the one to whom we are loyal, Christ's body joined to our own in faith.

So again we are in the context of demonic powers that we have to watch and always guard against. We are in the context of risky relationships, where we need protection and need to protect.

He Speaks with Authority: Mark 1

The gospel is one of these great texts from Mark 1. This is what happens when hyperactives write: zip, zip, zip, zip. You get four or five great texts in four strokes of the pen. There are hardly enough sentences to keep up. Mark is just spitting it out as fast as he can go, and it's all good, just outstanding stuff.

So here we go with this gorgeous little story from Mark 1. First of all, when Jesus comes, “he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes.” That is the first thing we should notice here, and it’s a lot of fun.

Ordinarily in the human community words are used referentially. They are used as references to things. Here is their great strength and their great weakness. We receive all kinds of communication through references. When someone says it’s going to be seventeen below outside, we all shiver, knowing full well that the reference describes a level of cold that is going to be somewhat difficult to tolerate. When someone says it’s seventy-eight degrees right now in Addis, we say, “That lucky stiff,” because we know that seventy-eight degrees is a very comfortable summer temperature, and it’s not quite right for this time of year. When a friend of ours shows up at church, as one did yesterday, having been in Naples all winter, all tan and lovely from being on the golf course day after day, we say, “That lucky stiff, that sinner.” We know what that means. The tan refers to a level of warmth that makes even winter enjoyable.

Jesus does sometimes speak referentially. But when he promises, he speaks in an entirely different category. He speaks with authority. He doesn’t just describe and enlist, appeal and seek the cooperation of the will. He declares, bestows, grants, gives, in such a way that when he speaks, his word empowers. It gives what it says. It creates what it demands. It brings forth what it requires.

We see this happening again and again in the first chapter of Mark. He calls his disciples: bang. They get up and follow. There’s not a moment’s hesitation. It’s not that he has called and they have responded. He has called, and they have had no alternative but to respond. They have been brought into service, enlisted.

In the same way, we now see him with a demoniac, the first of a whole series: a poor demon-possessed man who has lost touch with himself, adrift like flotsam and jetsam, skimming across the water, going here and there for no apparent reason. He’s lost. The first time I was in Africa, I was out south of Arusha, in Tanzania, and we saw such a man: naked, filthy, his hair packed with dirt, running and screaming in the wilderness. We stopped, but he ran and got away. That kind of experience is more common there. I think if we knew the gospel, we would probably see more of it here too. But it takes the gospel to see it. We don’t see it because we are so lost in our own culture that it seems impossible to us there could be powers greater than ourselves. Smoke another one, pour me another one.

This poor demoniac is lost in himself, and when Jesus comes, the demon recognizes him. We are going to see this over and over again in Mark's Gospel: nobody can figure Jesus out, but the demons have his number. They recognize his power even as we fail to see it. They know in some decisive sense that their number is up. It is only when we see the deliverance that we know we too are freed, in the same way as this demoniac.

But this is the story: the demoniac appears, he recognizes Jesus, and Jesus takes power over the demon. That is Jesus' chief characteristic at this point. He has power over sins, power over demons, power over death, power over everything that opposes him. And having met this demoniac, a man genuinely possessed, he doesn't say, "Take two of these and you'll feel better in the morning." He doesn't say, "Demon possession is an ancient phenomenon we no longer recognize." He sees the demon, the demon recognizes him, and in a moment of mutual recognition Jesus drives out the demon. He exorcises the demon and so brings the man back.

He speaks as one with authority, and because he speaks with such authority, the demon has no alternative. The demon doesn't say, "Just a minute, give me one more chance." He doesn't say, "I'll have to decide whether I'm going to leave." He doesn't say, "Don't I have a choice? I've made friends with this guy. He's actualizing my potential, and I'm reaching out to achieve myself. Can't you just let me have him till quarter past five?" There's no such talk. Jesus comes on the scene, and the demon recognizes him: "Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God." As a matter of fact, I have. He has come to release.

I think it is really important, preaching on this text, not to get lost in its oddity. I can tell you lots of stories like the one about the man we saw south of Arusha. I participated in some exorcisms when I was in Tanzania the first time, and I expect I'll see more. It's part of life. When the gospel becomes intense, we start seeing and recognizing that there are powers out there. But we don't recognize them in a vacuum, as though we were left by ourselves. We recognize them from the expulsion. We become aware of the depth of these powers when Christ overcomes them. So we don't set out to defend or justify or prove that there really are demons. For a while one of the faculty at Luther got charged up about the devil and was convinced that the way to bear witness was to preach the devil. Well, you don't make concessions to the opposition. It is in the light of Christ that we see the devil's tail. We see him as Christ shoves him out the door. And if we see him otherwise, we have to do as Luther said: run to the manger, run to the Christ child, run to the baby nursing at Mary's breast, run to the cross, because it is only there that we are safe from these powers.

It is characteristic of Jesus. Once he sees a demon, he says, “I can take care of that.” He doesn’t refer us to ourselves, or throw us back on our own resources, or tell us to try harder. Once he sees this poor demoniac, he delivers him. And when he delivers him, his fame spreads even further. Why? Because his word is integral. It is whole. You can rely on it. It is trustworthy and true. It does what it says.

So these four texts, the lessons, the gospel, and the psalm, all come around to this: they show us the powers that contend against us. So we sing in “A Mighty Fortress”: “And though this world, with devils filled, should threaten to undo us, we will not fear, for God hath willed his truth to triumph through us.” And so we become the ones who hear and bear this word, in the joy of God’s self-expression in Christ Jesus. I’ll let you go with that, and I’ll see you soon.

SOURCE

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