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“What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth?” That’s the first question put to Jesus in the Gospel of Mark. It is really the core question of the Gospel. What are we to make of the fact that Mark puts that question in the mouth of an unclean spirit? To make matters worse, the demon got everything right by calling Jesus the Holy One of God and accusing him of having come to destroy evil spirits.

How did all of this strike the astute people of God in the synagogue? Mark tells us they were amazed and asked each other, “What is this?” Why was it so easy for Jesus’ enemies and so hard for potential disciples to understand who Jesus was and what he was about?

Perhaps it’s the difference between our reactions when we are in danger or asked for a commitment. The defeated unclean spirit who spoke for the demon world knew the jig was up. The Holy One of God was stronger than all the demons. Everything about Jesus made it clear that it was only a matter of time before divine love would reveal their utter impotence. Meanwhile, the ordinary people who were not threatened stood around with their jaws dropping. It was too soon to make up their minds; they weren’t ready to make a commitment for or against Jesus.

Although the demons perceived clearly that Jesus was their conqueror, Mark doesn’t make that the centerpiece of this incident. It takes a while for human beings to get the picture, so Mark presents Jesus as a teacher with a brand new pedagogy. Jesus called people to hope for the kingdom of God, and then he showed them exactly what it looked like. His method was enticing rather than overpowering. His was all about freeing people.

As the folks were trying to get a handle on who Jesus was, they compared him to their religious leaders. The scribes were the official teachers of the day, the ones who had studied and interpreted the meaning of the Scriptures. They were religious professionals. Jesus simply professed faith — in word and deed.

Jesus astounded the people because he didn’t just talk about the law, he made God’s love tangible. There’s no other explanation for why some people simply dropped everything to follow him. Jesus’ “authority” came through in his actions. Therefore, his appearance on the scene — on any scene — raised the same question: “What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth?”

Each of us must answer that question — probably more than once in our lives. Today’s responsorial psalm has us

challenge ourselves four times over: “If today you hear his voice, harden not your hearts.” While those gawking bystanders in the synagogue didn’t make any commitments after seeing and hearing Jesus, they did allow themselves to be curious. That was a necessary first step. They were letting their hearts be vulnerable. In the encyclical *Evangelii Gaudium* (“The Joy of the Gospel”), Pope Francis says: “The great danger in today’s world, pervaded as it is by consumerism, is ... a complacent yet covetous heart, the feverish pursuit of frivolous pleasures, and a blunted conscience” (#2). Francis quotes Pope Paul VI and says “our “technological society has succeeded in multiplying occasions of pleasure, yet has found it very difficult to engender joy” (#7). When Jesus showed people what the kingdom of God felt like he was whetting their appetite for joy.

Mark wrote his Gospel to instruct us about the Teacher. He knew that even those disciples who left everything behind had a long road ahead of them before they would understand just what it was that Jesus of Nazareth would do with them. Perhaps the challenge of today is not so much to make a new commitment, but to let our hearts be shaken. Rereading the Gospel of Mark, we are invited to look again at Jesus the Teacher who put every word of his preaching into action. We are invited to remember the moments when we felt his invitation and wanted to give him our all. Francis’ words call us to ask what might be dulling our hearts, drugging us into a complacency that accepts pleasure instead of seeking joy.

We’ve already heard the answer to the demon’s frightened “What have you to do with us?” It is the only thing we have heard Jesus teach up to this point in Mark’s Gospel. He’s making us an offer and we must choose to accept or refuse: “The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent and believe in the gospel!”

## **DEUTERONOMY 18:15-20**

The Book of Deuteronomy (the Second Law) is presented as Moses’ final testament to the Israelites before the conquest of Canaan. Just before our reading begins, the author has talked about Israel’s leaders. The first group of leaders to be established were judges: “You shall appoint judges and officials ... to administer true justice.” Next, we hear of kings: When you have come to the land, if you decide to have a king over you, “you may indeed set over you a king whom the Lord, your God, will choose.” Speaking about the priests or the tribe of Levi, the author primarily explains how the people are to give material support to the priests (Deuteronomy 16:18, 17:14-15, 18:1-6). Those three groups comprised what we might think of as the institutional leadership of the community. The people were to follow this divinely sanctioned leadership and avoid the pagan shamans, magicians and anyone who sought oracles from the dead.

But God was not satisfied with only those roles. Therefore, Moses explained that when the people come to the land “A prophet like me will the Lord, your God, raise up for you from among your own kin.” This was, as if to say, that institutional leadership, the chosen judges, hereditary priests, and divinely sanctioned rulers were not enough to guarantee that God’s will and word would be communicated faithfully to the people.

Moses says that the prophet will not be extraordinary, no angel or stranger or celebrity, but someone from among their own kin. The prophet’s identity comes simply and wholly from speaking God’s word, following no command except divine inspiration. Thus, those who refuse to listen to the prophet will be treated as people who reject God. And, lest someone decide to usurp the role, God warns “if a prophet presumes to speak ... an oracle I have not commanded ... or speaks in the name of other gods, he shall die” (18:20).

This reading, chosen here to reflect on Jesus, offers a promise that can be both disturbing and comforting. It will be disturbing to any who puts total trust in the institutions of religion because it recognizes that every human structure is fallible and the religious establishment, like any other, can fall into the self-service or rigidity that undermines its vocation to facilitate vibrant relationships with the living God. The comforting promise we hear is that God will never abandon us to our own devices, no matter how sacrosanct we might think they are. In the face of mediocre or distorted leadership, God will raise up prophets.

Given God’s promise to provide prophets to correct our communal course, we are left with the question of how to discern who is speaking on God’s behalf. Unfortunately, the reading does not give us the kit for a litmus test by which to determine who is genuine and who speaks for the false prophets, but there are some parameters. Like Moses, most prophets are reluctant to take on their role, often because they know that when people resist the word of God, they take it out on the messenger.

The message God speaks through the prophets usually demands better treatment of the poor and a conversion on the part of the comfortable and powerful. That leads to the realization that a prophetic message will always cause tension and virtually never bring obvious advantage to the messenger. In the long run, Moses might have summed up the criteria for discernment of prophets by admitting that his vocation was not his idea, but God-given for the sake of others and repeating “A prophet like me will the Lord, your God, raise up for you.”

## **PSALMS 95:1-2, 6-7, 7-9**

The refrain the community sings with our responsorial psalm takes us back to the Exodus, the journey Moses had just completed in the setting of the first reading. But like all the psalms, it has applications far beyond its historical context. The basic thrust of Psalm 95 calls us to reverence the God to whom we owe our existence and salvation.

We repeat: “If today you hear his voice...” That not only drives home the content of the psalm, but reflects on the most basic attitudes called forth by our scriptural tradition. It reminds us that we believe that God speaks to us continuously through Scripture and tradition, through people and cultures and all of creation. (For further reflection, read the papal encyclical, “*Laudato Si’*, on Care for Our Common Home.”)

Our God is not a mythical god, someone to learn about as we might learn about Caesar. Our God invites us into personal relationship, into an experience of love that illuminates and far outshines dogma. When we sing “If today you hear his voice,” we remind ourselves to be on the lookout, to be listening all day long. Then, based on that belief, we tell ourselves, “harden not your heart.” That reminds us to cultivate a heart of flesh, to be vulnerable to God’s word and revelation.

We express loving vulnerability as we bow down and kneel before God. Those ancient gestures express the idea that we are thoroughly disarmed; they speak in body language to say that we put ourselves in God’s hands and at God’s disposal. Performing those gestures helps us deepen the attitudes they symbolize.

The psalm’s reference to God as the rock of our salvation and to Meribah and Massah, recall Exodus 17, the story of how the people lost hope in God and complained that they were about to die of thirst. While their complaint seems most natural, their salvation came from an unimaginable source: Moses, following God’s instruction, struck a rock with his staff causing life-saving water to flow freely for them.

As we sing today’s refrain, we are invited to remember when and how we have heard God’s voice in our lives. To listen well, we must also allow God’s word to reach our heart and thus come to unique expression in whatever we do today and for the rest of our lives.

## **1 CORINTHIANS 7:32-35**

This section of Paul’s advice about the single or married life must be understood in the light of his eschatological expectation. Paul believed that the time was short, the end of the world was near. We might put this in perspective by considering what we do when faced with an imminent crisis. When people faced last summer’s hurricanes and had to evacuate, what was most important to do before leaving? What did they feel they had to take with them? What did they have to leave behind because it was less important than what was already filling their car or suitcase?

Consider what you would do if you thought the end of the world was coming within 18 months. What activities would edge out everything else? What would rise to primary importance? That’s more or less the context of Paul’s thinking in this part of the letter. He’s saying that the eve of the end of the world is not the time to plan a wedding. Your activities in anticipation of the immanent second coming of Christ are different from making a five-year plan for eliminating homelessness in the city.

Perhaps Paul’s message to us today can be taken as a call to evaluate our priorities. Are we spending our time on what is really most vital for our moment of history? Are the things we are concerned about worthy of the attention we give them or are they distractions from what is more life-giving for us and our world?

## **MARK 1:21-28**

When we read the Gospel of Mark with fresh eyes we see how Mark is not only fast-paced, but tries to communicate the excitement and amazement people felt as they encountered Jesus. This infers that Jesus himself exhibited great excitement about the message he was communicating. The selection we hear today focuses on the question of just who Jesus of Nazareth is, or as the unclean spirit asked, “What have you to do with us?”

First of all, Jesus was a reverent Jew who went to the synagogue in Capernaum where he had taken up residence. Capernaum was a rather prosperous city of around 10,000 people. Situated on a trade route, it was also blessedly distant from Herod’s administrative capital of Tiberius.

The two ideas that Mark emphasizes in this passage are that Jesus was a teacher and that he exercised authority. If we ask what it was that Jesus taught, Mark comes up quite short on prose. Until now and for some time to come we will hear only 19 words of Jesus’ teaching: “This is the time of fulfillment. The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel” (Mark 1:15). The rest of what Jesus says between the beginning of the Gospel and Chapter 2, Verse 19 is dialogue with disciples, demons and people in need of healing.

That paucity of verbal content makes it all the more striking that the people would be so impressed with Jesus’ teaching. Mark tells us that the people saw Jesus’ authority in distinct contrast to that of the scribes. The scribes were key religious authorities. They were biblical exegetes and could make binding interpretations of the law. Many of them were Pharisees and they had earned their stripes through formal study and teaching. Jesus had none of that pedigree.

According to Mark, Jesus’ authority came from the simple fact that his word was borne out in deed. That’s what we see in the expulsion of the unclean spirit. He preached about the kingdom of God and his word made it appear. His word was like the divine word of Genesis, creating the very reality of which he spoke.

As Mark weaves his Gospel message, he shows that the people who saw Jesus were amazed and questioning one another. They saw his authority, but didn’t know what to make of it. At the same time, the unclean spirit, a representative of the demonic world, knew right away what Jesus was all about. The question “Have you come to destroy us?” suggests what the next phrase makes explicit: The demons recognized that Jesus had been sent by God and their power was impotent against him. It would take the disciples a little longer to answer the question of what Jesus meant for them.

“What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth?” Mark puts this question before every reader of the Gospel. He invites us to journey with him through the rest of the story to learn just what it means that Jesus’ word and deed brought the time of fulfillment.

## **Planning: 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time**

**By: Lawrence Mick**

If you have been paying attention to the readings since Epiphany, you may be overcome with a sense of déjà vu. This weekend again offers us passages about prophecy, preaching and hearing God’s word.

This might prompt us to look a little deeper into the effect of preaching God’s word to others. Moses says that God will raise up a prophet and God will put the words that he is to proclaim into the prophet’s mouth. This suggests that the prophet must first appropriate God’s word personally to be able to share it with others.

More broadly, this reminds us that the word of God is intended to change us, to transform our minds and hearts and lives. That really has to be the ultimate criterion for whether the Liturgy of the Word is being done well or not. If the assembly is not being transformed, slowly to be sure, but truly changed, then our efforts are useless.

Before we try to evaluate the assembly’s transformation, however, we ought to start with ourselves. Do we really expect to be changed in some way every time we come to worship? Are we open to whatever transformation God wants to create in us? What are the impediments that keep us from hearing God’s word with truly open ears and open hearts? Planners might gather (perhaps with lectors) to reflect and share with each other how the word of God has touched their lives and

what impediments to deeper transformation remain. If that seems unworkable, try sharing these questions with your spouse or a close friend. Not only can this deepen your own spiritual life, but it may reveal ways to help the assembly to do the same.

### **Feasts: Presentation of the Lord and St. Blaise**

Friday of this week is the feast of the Presentation of the Lord and Saturday is the optional memorial of St. Blaise. Presentation comes 40 days after Christmas, because Jewish law required the presentation of a firstborn son on that day. The feast is also called Candlemas Day because candles are blessed and used in the opening procession. That, in turn, stems from Simeon's words calling Jesus a light to the Gentiles and glory for Israel. An evening Mass might encourage more parishioners to celebrate this feast. In any case, study the Missal's directives and celebrate as fully as possible.

The blessing of throats associated with the memorial of St. Blaise is appropriate on Saturday, but not properly at any anticipated Sunday Masses. The blessing is linked to the memorial. Invite those who desire the blessing to gather to celebrate St. Blaise, either at a morning Mass or at a Liturgy of the Word. See Chapter 51 in the Book of Blessings for the format for such services.

## **Prayers: 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time**

By: Joan DeMerchant

### **Introduction**

Throughout his ministry, Jesus responded to and addressed the needs around him. Today we hear of his early teaching and confronting evil with authority through an exorcism. We recognize his profound actions as miracles. We, too, are called to respond to the needs around us with compassion. We rely on him for the support we need to address what we see, including dark and difficult issues. Doing that is a kind of miracle in itself.

### **Penitential Act**

- Lord Jesus, you taught in the synagogue with authority: Lord, have mercy.
- Christ Jesus, you confronted and drove out unclean spirits: Christ, have mercy.
- Lord Jesus, you call us to serve others and to confront evil when we see it: Lord, have mercy.

### **Prayer of the Faithful**

**Presider** Let us pray for the needs of the world today and for those called to address those needs.

**Minister** For the church as it continues the ministry of Jesus in every time and place, may we offer open ears and hearts and seek understanding and compassion in all that we do ... we pray,

- For those called to confront the dark forces of evil in violence, war, poverty and inequality wherever it is found in the world ... we pray,
- For those Christians who do not feel responsible for addressing evil or who harden their hearts to the suffering of others ... we pray,
- For those who have separated Christianity from the call to minister to those in need, or who look to the Gospel for self-aggrandizement or personal prosperity ... we pray,
- For those suffering from the dark forces of physical or mental illness, poverty or addiction, depression or despair, especially in this community; and for those who work to assist and heal them ... we pray,
- For the needs of this community ... we pray,

**Presider** Holy God, you sent your beloved Son to speak and act prophetically in your name. You gave him power over the dark forces of evil for the sake of the whole world. We are called to hear his voice and to continue his work of confronting evil wherever we may find it. Help us, we pray; and empower us in his name. Amen.

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