



LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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With Authority and Power

Luke 4:31-44

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We all know the old saying that talk is cheap. We've all probably at some time told someone: "Put your money where your mouth is." Talk is easy; *doing* shows commitment. We see this principle at work throughout Scripture. The Lord gave his law through Moses as the charter of the covenant community. To be a member of that community—to be committed to it—was to live a certain way. St. James tells us in his New Testament epistle that faith without works is dead—not because works are a substitute for faith, but because works are *evidence* of faith. As Christians we trust in the sacrifice for our sins that Jesus made at the cross. As Christians we trust Jesus as Lord. And that trust demonstrates itself as we stop trusting in ourselves and in the things of the world to save us and instead trust wholly in Jesus. That faith displays itself as we return the love that God has shown us in Christ by seeking to please him—not seeking to earn his love, but seeking to please him because he first loved us, even when we were still his enemies. That faith displays itself as our excitement and enthusiasm for the new life we have in Jesus spills over into a commitment to show the love of God to the people around us and to share the Good News with them. Again, talk is cheap. Anyone can recite the Creed. But those with real faith in the sacrifice of Jesus are willing to sacrifice themselves for his sake in return.

On that note: In last Sunday's lesson we saw Jesus preaching in the synagogue at Nazareth. We saw him reading about the Messiah and the Messiah's mission to release the

captives and to preach good news to the poor as he read from and preached on Isaiah's prophecy. We saw him as he put down the scroll and told the people: "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled" (Luke 4:21). But what Jesus preached in Nazareth raises two questions. First, is Jesus really ready to do all this? And second, does he have the authority to do it? Anyone could enter the synagogue, read about the Messiah in Isaiah, and then say, "That's me!" Jesus wasn't the first one to come along and claim to be the Messiah. Was he really ready to go from talking about being the Messiah to actually *being* the Messiah? And even if he was ready to get to work, was he really the Messiah? Did he have the authority to be the Messiah? Or was he just another cook or wannabe?

And so now that we've heard what Jesus *preached*, Luke shows us the things he *did* to back up that message. As we've seen, Jesus began his ministry in the region of Galilee, taking his message mostly to subsistence farmers and fishermen. In verses 31-44 of Chapter 4 we see what that ministry looked like. Look at verses 31-32:

And he went down to Capernaum, a city of Galilee. And he was teaching them on the Sabbath, and they were astonished at his teaching, for his word possessed authority.

During this first part of Jesus' ministry, Capernaum was his home base. In contrast to Nazareth, which was a tiny village well off the beaten track, Capernaum was a major city. It probably had a population of about 1500 people. It was on the north shore of the Sea of Galilee and was also on the imperial highway that led north to Damascus. We know from what Luke tells us later that it was a toll-collection point on the highway and it was significant enough to have Roman soldiers stationed there. Luke tells us that on the Sabbath Jesus made it his practise to preach in the synagogues of the city. This was natural, because it

was the time when the largest number of people would be gathered to hear the Scriptures read and expounded on, but it's also significant that Jesus began his ministry on the Sabbath. St. Ambrose wrote many, many years ago that "[Luke] describes the work of divine healing began on the Sabbath day to show from the outset that the new creation began where the old creation ceased."¹ Jesus is building on the Old Covenant to establish a New Covenant. And as he preaches on the Sabbath, what we saw him preaching in Nazareth would have been what he was preaching in Capernaum and the surrounding towns and villages. And the people who heard him were astonished; he preached with authority that they weren't accustomed to hearing. But, again, talk is cheap. We've all heard preachers who preached with authority, but couldn't backup their talk with their lives. And so Luke shows us that Jesus was more than talk. We *heard* his ministry of release preached in Nazareth. Now in Capernaum we *see* his ministry of released *lived out*. Luke has picked out two healings in particular as examples: one an exorcism and the other the healing of a fever. The first is found in verses 33-37:

And in the synagogue there was a man who had the spirit of an unclean demon, and he cried out with a loud voice, "Let us alone! 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." But Jesus rebuked him, saying, "Be silent and come out of him!" And when the demon had thrown him down in their midst, he came out of him, having done him no harm. And they were all amazed and said to one another, "What is this word?"

¹ *Exposition of the Gospel of Luke* 4.58, cited in *Luke* (Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture), Arthur A. Just, Jr., ed. (Downers Grove, Ill.: Intervarsity Press, 2003), page 84.

For with authority and power he commands the unclean spirits, and they come out!” And reports about him went out into every place in the surrounding region.

Luke puts Jesus in a creepy and disturbing scene. As he’s preaching in the synagogue he’s confronted by a demon-possessed man. As we see in the Gospels, this sort of thing was fairly common in Jesus ministry and it really highlights the impact that Jesus’ ministry had on the world. Before his victory over sin and death at the cross, demons seems to have run rampant, even daring to confront the Son of God himself. They knew that God was sovereign, that he had a plan, and that their time was limited. The demon confronted Jesus, saying, “Leave us alone, Jesus. I know you; you’re the Holy One of God—the Messiah. Have you come to destroy us? Have you come to put an end to our fun?”

The demon recognized what the people didn’t. It knew exactly who Jesus was and it knew what his presence meant. It knew that the promised messianic kingdom had arrived and that the demons’ days were numbered. Jesus doesn’t respond by arguing with the demon; he simply confirms the demon’s fears. Jesus acts with the very power and authority that the demons were afraid of. He commands the demon to shut up and to leave the man alone.

No one’s sure exactly why Jesus commanded the demon not to speak, especially considering that the demon was supernaturally revealing who Jesus was. It might have been that Jesus was afraid that people might get the idea that he was in cahoots with the demon. It might have been that Jesus simply wasn’t ready to reveal that much information about who he was. As we see through Jesus’ ministry, even the people who followed him didn’t fully understand who he was and what he was about

until Pentecost and Jesus clearly planned it that way. Whatever his reasoning, Jesus commands the demon to be quiet and to leave the man and that’s exactly what the demon does. Immediately and with no fighting or arguing the demon prostrates the man before Jesus and leaves him. Not only does the demon immediately obey Jesus’ command, but in the process, in prostrating himself at Jesus’ feet, he acknowledges Jesus’ lordship and authority over him.

Luke says that the people were “amazed”. Specifically, he says that the people were amazed that Jesus’ word—his command—had such authority. It’s not that the people weren’t accustomed to seeing demons exorcised; it’s that Jesus was able to exorcise the demon with a simple word and that the demon obeyed immediately and without a fight. This is the unique pattern of Jesus ministry and then of the apostles’ ministry after him. The people of Capernaum had seen demon activity and demons exorcism before, but what they were used to was a lot of mumbo jumbo and drama. They’d no doubt seen plenty of failed exorcisms too. Think of the movie *The Exorcist* and the demon fighting back for days against the priest’s efforts to cast him out of the girl. In contrast Jesus had complete authority over the demons. What he commanded they did and they did immediately. We see the same thing as his apostles and the first Christians continued his ministry and did their work under Jesus’ authority. Jesus had said in Nazareth that the day of the Messiah and of his kingdom had come. His is a kingdom in which the devil and his minions and in which sin and death are defeated and so here in the synagogue at Capernaum Jesus backs up his talk with action. He shows that the kingdom had come and that the devil is defeated. And so if the people were amazed at what Jesus had said, now they’re even more amazed by what he *does* to backup his talk. Luke says that reports went out

“into every place in the surrounding region” as these people shared their amazement.

In verses 38-39 Luke tells us that Jesus went from the synagogue to Simon Peter’s house and he reports another kind of “release”.

And he arose and left the synagogue and entered Simon’s house. Now Simon’s mother-in-law was ill with a high fever, and they appealed to him on her behalf. And he stood over her and rebuked the fever, and it left her, and immediately she rose and began to serve them.

From synagogue to home is a pattern we see throughout both Jesus’ ministry and in the book of Acts. Jesus and the apostles often preached first in the synagogue, but the people never seemed to respond in faith. In Nazareth—and in many other places—their response was outright hostility. Sometimes they were so angry that they saw stoning as the appropriate response. Sometimes, as we see here in Capernaum, the response was positive, but not a response of faith. But the pattern we see was then for Jesus or the apostles to go from the synagogue to someone’s home and in that home we see a response of faith. In this case, faith comes as he heals Peter’s mother-in-law. What’s interesting is that just as he rebuked the demon and it left the possessed man, he now rebukes the fever it leaves. In fact, it leaves as quickly as the demon had left. No fighting, no witch-doctor mumbo jumbo, no delays. He spoke with authority and the fever was instantly gone. Peter’s mother-in-law was no doubt amazed just as the people in the synagogue were, but that’s not what Luke focuses on. He focuses on her getting up from her bed and serving Jesus. Having been healed she ministers to him with hospitality. In Luke’s gospel this kind of response is what Jesus was looking for and it foreshadows the kind of response we ought to have to his

release and healing in our own lives. Jesus ministered to her in love and her natural response was to respond by serving him out of gratitude. She wasn't trying to curry his favour; she already had it. The same goes for us. Jesus has released us from sin's slavery. He has ministered to us in love. Our natural response should be to respond to that loving ministry with gratitude. That said, Luke's main point here is to show Jesus acting with authority. When he'd preached from Isaiah he had claimed that his was a ministry of release: freeing the captives and giving sight to the blind. Talk is cheap. Jesus knew that. And so here we see him freeing the man captive to a demon and healing the woman suffering from a terrible fever.

As word got around the sick and the possessed started coming to Jesus.

Now when the sun was setting, all those who had any who were sick with various diseases brought them to him, and he laid his hands on every one of them and healed them. And demons also came out of many, crying, "You are the Son of God!" But he rebuked them and would not allow them to speak, because they knew that he was the Christ. (Luke 4:40-41)

Notice that the people are still bound by the old ways. Jesus had no qualms about healing on the Sabbath, but as the people came in hope, they waited until the sun went down—they waited for the Sabbath to end. They were afraid to do good on the Sabbath. Even those who were healthy themselves and who brought their family and friends to Jesus were captives to the law—or at least to a faulty interpretation of it. Everyone here needs the release from captivity that Jesus has brought.

And this brings us back to Jesus: who he was and what his ministry was all about. Jesus healed all sorts of people from all sorts of problems, but Luke

singles out two specific healings here as he tells us about the demon-possessed man and the woman with the fever. And it says something that Luke presents them in the order he does. Demon possession is something we recognise as an overtly spiritual problem. This was a clear case of "good versus evil" or of light overwhelming darkness. But the case of the fever isn't so obviously spiritual. Peter's mother-in-law was sick. It was a physical ailment. True, many people in that culture attributed physical and mental sickness to demonic activity. They often associated it with sin. Think of the disciples, when they encountered a blind man, asking Jesus whose fault his blindness was: Did he sin or was it his parents? Jesus side-stepped the question and told them whatever the root cause, God had allowed it so that his gracious power could be manifested as the man was healed. And that points to the connection between the demon and the fever: Whatever our earthly ailments, whether overtly spiritual or simply physical and organic, they are all the result of the Fall. Humanity has chosen to submit itself to the serpent as master rather than to God and in doing so we've opened ourselves to his influence. In rebelling against God's sovereignty we've removed ourselves from the tree of life and now experience sickness and death. Both the demon and the fever are the end result of our *sin problem*.

In showing his authority over both the demon and the fever, Jesus shows his authority over humanity's sin problem. He also backs up his statement at Nazareth that Isaiah's prophecy was being fulfilled. In Jesus' authority we see that God's kingdom has come. Bishop Wright says,

"When his commands to the demons were obeyed, there ought to be only one conclusion for the onlookers: Israel's god was at last becoming king.

'The kingdom of god has come upon you.' The battle was already joined, and it was the battle, not with Rome, but with the true accuser, the satan."²

In Jesus the kingdom has arrived. And that upset all sorts of ideas—then *and* now—about what his kingdom is and what it's supposed to look like and whom it's supposed to include. As he preached on Isaiah's prophecy, Jesus emphasised that he had come to preach good news to the poor—to those on the "outside". The demon-possessed man was certainly one of those people on the outside. And yet Peter's mother-in-law too—she was "poor". The fact that she was living with her daughter and son-in-law suggests that she had no sons of her own and no support structure. These were the "poor" people and the "outsiders" to whom Jesus had come to preach good news. But what he healed them of points to something much bigger. He was battling not against flesh and blood, not against the Romans or the Herodians or the corrupt high priest. He was battling directly against sin and death—against enemies which held captive the entire human race—even the Romans and the Herodians—and from whom very human being needs release. When we understand that the real enemies are sin and death—the effects of our rejection of God—suddenly we realise that we're all—every one of us—in the same boat no matter who we are. But the people in Capernaum, just like the people in Nazareth and most of the other people Jesus healed, didn't understand. Look at what Luke tells us in verses 42-44:

And when it was day, he departed and went into a desolate place. And the people sought him and came to him, and would have kept him from leaving them, but he said to them, "I must preach the good news of the

² *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), p. 453.

kingdom of God to the other towns as well; for I was sent for this purpose.” And he was preaching in the synagogues of Judea.

Just as Jesus friends and family expected him to be their own personal miracle-worker, so did the people of Capernaum. They wanted to keep Jesus to themselves. They didn't understand that these little showdowns were part of a larger battle against a greater enemy and an enemy common to all of us.

Now, what about us? We've all experienced Jesus' authority in our lives to overcome our sin problem. In our baptism we've been washed clean, had his Spirit poured into us, and been grafted into him—into the life-giving vine, and brought back into fellowship God. We are his kingdom people. But how often are we like the people of Capernaum? Are we keeping Jesus and his kingdom to ourselves? A lot of Christians seem to look at Jesus only in terms of what he can do for them. Do we see him as our own personal miracle worker? A sort of heavenly Santa Claus or a divine vending machine? Are we only serving him in the hopes of getting something in return? Brothers and sisters, if that's what the Christian life amounts to for us, we haven't understood grace.

Maybe we do understand grace. Maybe we do understand that God's grace is a gift given to sinners, to his enemies, and that it can't be earned. Maybe we do follow and serve him out of love and gratitude for his grace. But we still often keep that grace to ourselves. For far too many Christians, the grace we've been given manifests itself as little more than private piety—reading our Bibles, praying, going to church, avoiding sin—all while we wait in hope of our Lord returning one day to rescue us from this evil world so that we can go to live with him. Brothers and sisters, that's not our calling either.

Jesus understood that his mission was to establish his kingdom here on earth. He did that not only by preaching good news to the poor—to *all* those oppressed by sin and death—he came and did battle with sin and death so that he could call us into that kingdom. Now he calls us to do the work of the kingdom at his side. He's filled us with his Spirit and he's gifted us with the gifts of grace so that we can carry on the battle. This has been our calling as human beings from the start. Adam was born into a garden that represented God's temple and the mission he was given was to be fruitful, to multiply, and to have dominion over God's creation—he was to spread the influence of God's temple over the whole earth. He failed. Then in Abraham, God called Israel to carry on that mission. At the centre of Israel was the temple—the light—and their mission was to carry that light and the influence of God's temple to the gentile nations. But Israel failed too. And yet, brothers and sisters, Jesus came to fulfil that mission given to Adam and given to Israel. And Jesus succeeded in his mission. He has established his kingdom here in his Church. But friends, he didn't establish his kingdom so that we can sit around being good and holy while we wait for escape to heaven. We, his Church, are the beachhead of the kingdom. He's given us his light and now calls us to spread it to the nations in anticipation of that day when he will return in final victory to cast sin and death into the lake of fire. In the Lord's Prayer we pray: “on earth as it is in heaven”. That's a prayer of anticipation, brothers and sisters. It's a prayer that looks forward to that day when the kingdom, now in the Father's safe-keeping in heaven, will be brought by Jesus to earth, to finally establish his temple as Adam was originally called to establish it throughout the earth.

This is why Jesus had to move on from Nazareth and Capernaum. His

mission was a *universal* mission. He didn't come to be a personal miracle-working for his friends and family—not even for Israel. He knew that the real problem—the real enemies—are sin and death. And sin and death are the enemies of *all* humanity. Sin and death are the rivals to God's kingdom. Jesus defeated our enemies and now sends us out into the world to proclaim the good news that the kingdom has come and to bring men and women into the kingdom as we call them to trust in the victory of Jesus. The first Adam failed in his mission, but the second Adam—Jesus—has succeeded and in his victory he has called and equipped us to spread his kingdom. As we pray, “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth, as it is in heaven,” let us always remember that this is more than a prayer. “On earth as it is in heaven” is the mission that Jesus has given us, to spread his kingdom as we await his victorious return.

Let us pray: Gracious Lord, remind us daily that, as St. James wrote, faith without works is dead. Remind us that you sent Jesus to release us from our captivity to sin and death so that we might preach the good news of that release to the rest of the world. And as we struggle with the difficulty of our mission, remind us that Jesus has already won the victory, that he has authority over our enemies, and that as we minister in his name we share in his authority. We ask this through him, who has conquered sin and death for us and now lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.