

February 4 (Communion)

Over the last three weeks we have focused on various ways that people in the scriptures have recognized and responded to God's voice, to God speaking. Today we continue to hear about Jesus speaking, and as Mark moves us quickly through the good news (his is the shortest and most to the point gospel) we hear these verses as what happened after they left the synagogue.

As a quick reminder or some context if you weren't here...last week we heard about one Sabbath when Jesus stood up and read from the scriptures in the synagogue and right up in the middle of things an evil spirit spoke up and Jesus cast it out. The demon recognized Jesus' voice as God's authoritative voice and it responded in fear. It feared for its continued presence in the man's mind and body he had come to church in and it was right to be afraid because Jesus sent it out of the man and out of the place.

Today's scripture lesson is what happened after they left church that day...you know, just like when we leave church and go somewhere for lunch...

Mark 1: 29-39

²⁹ After leaving the synagogue, Jesus, James, and John went home with Simon and Andrew. ³⁰ Simon's mother-in-law was in bed, sick with a fever, and they told Jesus about her at once. ³¹ He went to her, took her by the hand, and raised her up. The fever left her, and she served them.

³² That evening, at sunset, people brought to Jesus those who were sick or demon-possessed. ³³ The whole town gathered near the door. ³⁴ He healed many who were sick with all kinds of diseases, and he threw out many demons. But he didn't let the demons speak, because they recognized him.

³⁵ Early in the morning, well before sunrise, Jesus rose and went to a deserted place where he could be alone in prayer. ³⁶ Simon and those with him tracked him down. ³⁷ When they found him, they told him, "Everyone's looking for you!"

³⁸ He replied, "Let's head in the other direction, to the nearby villages, so that I can preach there too. That's why I've come." ³⁹ He traveled throughout Galilee, preaching in their synagogues and throwing out demons.

Preaching and throwing out demons. Now this is a Jesus who rolls up his sleeves, right!? If this was an Oscar nominated film about the work of Jesus I can just hear the line that's in all the previews, "I came to do two things: preach and throw out demons. And I'm all done preaching!"

But seriously, from Mark's perspective and we know that Mark's gospel is the oldest manuscript we have in our possession which gives us some emphasis as far as its authority in witnessing to the life and ministry of Jesus. From Mark's perspective it is clear here that the most important thing Jesus had to do before he fulfilled his ultimate purpose was to preach...and throw out demons – to speak the good news of salvation and to remove evil in a way that very much sets the captives free.

In Luke 4:16-21 we get a glimpse of what Jesus read in his hometown. I don't know that it would have been the same reading when he went to Capernaum, but imagine hearing the words of the prophet Isaiah or any number of passages from the mouth of the one who will fulfill such promises. ¹⁶ *Jesus went to Nazareth, where he had been raised. On the Sabbath he went to the synagogue as he normally did and stood up to read. ¹⁷ The synagogue assistant gave him the scroll from the prophet Isaiah. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:*

¹⁸ *The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because the Lord has anointed me.
He has sent me to preach good news to the poor,
to proclaim release to the prisoners
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to liberate the oppressed,
¹⁹ and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.*

²⁰ *He rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the synagogue assistant, and sat down. Every eye in the synagogue was fixed on him. ²¹ He began to explain to them, "Today, this scripture has been fulfilled just as you heard it."*

Jesus' ministry right up to the crucifixion was to preach. To speak. Just like God spoke creation, Jesus speaks salvation. Good news to the poor. Release to the prisoner. Recovery of sight to the blind. Liberation of the oppressed. And proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. The year of the Lord's favor. When Isaiah wrote it, it was yet to come. As Jesus proclaimed it, it became a reality. This was Jesus' grand opening speech, this was the ribbon cutting on the coming of the gospel of peace.

This was the first time that Jesus spoke fully as the Son of God having been baptized and received the Holy Spirit into himself having given up his own status as God and taking human form. Speaking was his job. Healing, casting out demons and other signs and wonders were all enacted to support the authority he had to speak the truth of the good news of salvation. The good news Jesus proclaimed constantly was that the kingdom of God is near.

And we might miss how this is good news because we have been raised in this truth, but the people who heard this would have found it shocking. God was supposed to be above and distant and the only human who could approach God was the high priest who went into the holy of holies once a year to offer particular sacrifice for the atonement for sin.

It was scandalous to talk about access to God, even the kingdom of God, the place where God reigns, as being near, as being close. It was also scandal to hear who the good news was for. The good news was for folks who were rarely ceremonially clean and able to even come to the synagogue. The poor, the prisoner, the blind (or otherwise physically limited), the oppressed. The good news is for the outsider, the one without power in the kingdom of this world.

No wonder a demon would hear these words from the authoritative mouth of God in flesh and be afraid. Jesus came to lift up, forgive, release, restore, and liberate what the devil loves to keep pressed down, guilty, broken and oppressed.

This is important because Jesus was the only one who has been called to die a sacrificial death for our salvation, but the proclamation of the good news has been conferred on we who are the church today.

The priority of preaching in Jesus' ministry before his death was as essential to the ongoing salvation work as his death itself. The words that Jesus preached were the invitation that brought the Lord's favor. Jesus' preaching was the invitation to draw near to God and be saved. The crucifixion was the one-time payment for all our sin. The resurrection was a preview, a foretaste of what the promise fulfilled looks like.

Jesus really surprised the disciples and I highly suspect disappointed a lot of folks – even made them mad – when he didn't come back to heal every illness and cast out every demon. He didn't stay in the town to meet every need or fix every broken place. His biggest work was the work of speaking. And there were folks who needed his words of invitation and good news so that they could gain eternity.

The words of God, the speaking of God's truth which is Jesus as he tells us in John's gospel that he is the way, the truth and the life, is still so very important today.

God still uses words of truth, words of encouragement, words of forgiveness, words of strength, words of eternity, words of salvation, words of just straight up good news. But the words of God can get lost or twisted or become just a jumbled mess as they are spoken into a noisy world.

God didn't just speak "in Bible times." God didn't just speak to prophets or special people. God doesn't just speak to pastors or other professional religious people. God doesn't just speak on demand or because we have finally found time to squeeze him into our busy schedule.

God speaks constantly through the scriptures of our Old and New Testament. I really appreciate the quote that I've seen online that says, "*Don't accuse God of being silent if your Bible has been closed.*" I would add that it is in the regular opening of the Bible that God speaks most specifically and personally to me and I think to anyone who has found themselves in an ongoing conversation with God. The Bible contains within its pages the very presence of God. Through its pages God shares God's heart and mind, God's desires and frustrations, God's power and God's own vulnerability.

And I do completely realize that I'm a broken record about how important it is that we engage God through the scriptures, but it's because I know how much God has spoken into me and over me and through me because of my ongoing relationship with God where our conversation is very much woven together through the scriptures.

We live in a world (which has maybe always been this way) in which there are many people who claim to speak for God and there are many disagreements – even vicious, angry, violent ones. As a preacher, I do not stand here to speak for God, but of God. And if I had any one wish for each and every person it would be that each one would find a way to read or listen to the scriptures for themselves and to pray for the Holy Spirit to be the one to bring understanding.

I trust that God wants to be known. I trust that God's truth is contained in the Bible as it points always to Jesus who is the way, the truth and the life. I trust that every person who attempts to read it in order to seek God will find God there. I also trust the truism, "You can lead a horse to water, but you can't make it drink."

If you just don't read the Bible because you just don't like reading then get it on DVD or CD or MP3. If you don't read the Bible because you're too busy then make time. If you don't read the Bible because you don't know where to start – start with Mark. If you think it's boring, just give it a chance. These pages are filled with the best of God and angels and people and the worst kinds of evil. If it seems too complicated read The Message or get a children's Bible to start. And if you're not going to read it because you're just not going to then don't. With two exceptions in this room, I'm not your mom. Or if you're the kind of person who needs to be challenged, then I dare you. I just dare you to read it and not be blessed by the time spent with the Lord.

Isaiah 55:10-11 speaks of the power of the words that come from God,

¹⁰ *Just as the rain and the snow come down from the sky
and don't return there without watering the earth,
making it conceive and yield plants
and providing seed to the sower and food to the eater,
¹¹ so is my word that comes from my mouth;
it does not return to me empty.
Instead, it does what I want,
and accomplishes what I intend.*

This is all about God. Jesus came to this earth to point people to God through his words and then seal the deal for all who would hear those words and believe through his death.

We are here in this moment to remember together once again that tremendous gift. As we celebrate communion today, we do so as those who remember not just that Jesus died, but why Jesus died. Jesus died to make the good news true. Jesus died as promise fulfilled. Jesus died to pay for sin and rose again to defeat death itself.

The words from Jesus' mouth have not returned empty. Jesus' words from the cross, "It is finished," have accomplished what God intended.

Let's turn now and take time to prepare ourselves to receive Jesus in the celebration of Communion...