

**FOURTH SUNDAY AFTER EPITHANY 01-31-21**

**DEUTERONOMY 18:15-20; PSALM 11; 1 CORINTHIANS 8:1-13;**

**MARK 1:21-28**

**GOOD MORNING -**

**ONE OF THE MANY THEMES WE MIGHT CONSIDER IN TODAY'S READINGS, AS A WHOLE, IS THE QUESTION OF HOW WE, AS A CHURCH, SPEAK TO THE WORLD. DEUTERONOMY MAY BE SPEAKING TO PEOPLE SEVERAL MILLENNIA AGO, BUT GOD STILL RAISES UP PROPHETS AMONG US WHO ARE WILLING TO SPEAK WHAT GOD SAYS.**

**THE BOOK OF DEUTERONOMY WAS WRITTEN AS MOSES' FAREWELL ADDRESS TO ISRAEL. IT WAS COMPOSED OVER SEVERAL CENTURIES, WITH THE FINAL EDITING AROUND THE TIME OF EXILE. THE CENTRAL PURPOSE OF THE BOOK WAS TO UNDERSCORE CONVENTIONAL PROVISIONS WITH GOD, AS ISRAEL STRUGGLED WITH ITS IDENTITY IN A FOREIGN LAND.**

**AS THE PASSAGE BEGINS, MOSES PROMISES THE PEOPLE OF ISRAEL THAT GOD WILL "RAISE UP FOR YOU A PROPHET LIKE ME" WHEN HE IS NO LONGER WITH THEM. HE GOES ON**

TO REMIND THEM OF THE MEETING AT MT HOREB WHEN GOD SPOKE TO ISRAEL AND GAVE THEM THE COMMANDMENTS. BECAUSE THE PEOPLE WERE FRIGHTENED BY SUCH DIRECT CONTACT WITH THE DIVINE, MOSES BECAME THE MEDIATOR BETWEEN THEM AND YAHWEH. THE ROLE OF PROPHET TO CONVEY THE GREAT PURPOSES OF GOD, BECAME A CENTRAL FACTOR IN ISRAEL'S RELATIONSHIP WITH THE LORD.

VERSES 17-20 FURTHER DESCRIBE THE ROLE OF THE PROPHETIC VOICE IN ISRAEL. ALL TRUE PROPHETS ARE CALLED BY GOD, AND IT IS THE LORD WHO GIVES THEM THE WORDS THEY ARE TO SPEAK. IF THE PEOPLE DO NOT HEED THEM THEY WILL BE HELD ACCOUNTABLE TO GOD. LIKEWISE, ANY PROPHET WHO PRESUMES TO SPEAK WORDS NOT FROM GOD WILL FACE DEATH.

THE EARLY CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY SAW THE PROMISE OF A PROPHET LIKE MOSES FULFILLED IN JESUS. IN TODAY'S GOSPEL PASSAGE, WE SEE JESUS CLAIMING AND MANIFESTING HIS AUTHORITY.

AFTER JESUS CALLED HIS FIRST FOUR DISCIPLES, HE TRAVELED TO CAPERNAUM IN GALILEE, WHICH WAS TO BECOME THE CENTER OF HIS MINISTRY IN THE AREA. MARK DESCRIBES A TYPICAL DAY IN JESUS' MINISTRY AS HE GOES TO TEACH AT THE SYNAGOGUE ON THE SABBATH.

LOCAL SYNAGOGUES WERE THE FOCUS OF JEWISH RELIGIOUS LIFE, AND EARLY IN HIS MINISTRY, JESUS OFTEN TAUGHT IN THE SYNAGOGUES. HOWEVER, FOLLOWING HIS REJECTION IN NAZARETH, INCREASED HOSTILITY LED HIM TO TEACH HIS DISCIPLES PRIVATELY OR ADDRESS LARGER CROWDS IN THE OPEN. BUT IN THIS PASSAGE FOR TODAY, THE PEOPLE IN THE SYNAGOGUE WERE "ASTOUNDED AT HIS TEACHING, FOR HE TAUGHT AS ONE HAVING AUTHORITY, AND NOT AS THE SCRIBES." SUCH AMAZEMENT WAS A COMMON RESPONSE IN MARK'S GOSPEL.

JESUS' AUTHORITY WAS FURTHER SHOWN BY AN ENCOUNTER WITH A MAN POSSESSED BY A DEMON OR AN "UNCLEAN SPIRIT". THIS IS THE FIRST OF FOUR EXORCISMS DESCRIBED IN MARK, AND IT FOLLOWS THE TYPICAL PATTERN OF SUCH ENCOUNTERS. NOW *UNCLEAN IS USED IN*

***THE SENSE OF CONFLICT TO WHAT IS HOLY, RATHER THAN IN AN IMMORAL, OR RITUAL PURITY CONTEXT.***

**FIRST, THE POSSESSED MAN ATTEMPTS TO RESIST THE DIVINE POWER OF JESUS AS HE CRIES OUT, “WHAT HAVE YOU TO DO WITH US, JESUS OF NAZARETH? ... I KNOW WHO YOU ARE, THE HOLY ONE OF GOD.” THE MAN WAS NOT IN CONTROL OF HIS OWN ACTIONS, AND EVEN HIS WORDS ARE NOT HIS OWN AS HE ADDRESSES JESUS.**

**HERE THE HOSTILE SPIRIT CALLS JESUS THE “HOLY ONE OF GOD” – I.E. ONE WHO IS CONSECRATED BY GOD. AS ELSEWHERE IN MARK, UNCLEAN SPIRITS AND OTHER OUTSIDERS RECOGNIZE THE IDENTITY OF JESUS; WHILE THOSE WHO MIGHT BE EXPECTED TO KNOW JESUS DO NOT. JESUS AT ONCE COMMANDS THE HOSTILE SPIRIT TO BE SILENT AND DEPART FROM THE MAN WHOSE LIFE IT CONTROLS. THE IMMEDIATE DEPARTURE OF THE UNCLEAN SPIRIT FROM THE MAN IS ACCOMPANIED BY CONVULSIONS AND LOUD CRIES. ONCE AGAIN, THE CROWD RESPONDS WITH AMAZEMENT. “WHAT IS THIS? A NEW TEACHING – WITH AUTHORITY!” NOT ONLY DID JESUS TEACH WITH**

**AUTHORITY; HE DEMONSTRATED THAT AUTHORITY AS HE CAST OUT THE MOST POWERFUL FORCES AGAINST HIM.**

**IN MARK'S GOSPEL, THIS EXORCISM IS THE FIRST PUBLIC ACT IN THE MINISTRY OF JESUS. IT DRAMATICALLY UNDERSCORES HIS AUTHORITY THAT EVEN THE DWELLERS OF THE SPIRIT WORLD HERE RECOGNIZE. THERE WERE OTHERS WHO CLAIMED TO CAST OUT DEMONS; BUT JESUS DID SO BY THE POWER OF HIS WORDS AND NOT BY MAGICAL INCANTATIONS. HIS WORD CALLS FOR REPENTANCE, ANNOUNCES THE COMING REIGN OF GOD, AND CASTS OUT DEMONS. AS HIS FAME SPREADS THROUGHOUT GALILEE, JESUS IS A FIGURE OF POWER AND AUTHORITY.**

**THE ISSUE IN PAULS' LETTER TO THE CORINTHIANS CONCERNED WHETHER OR NOT CHRISTIANS WERE PERMITTED TO EAT MEAT THAT HAD BEEN LEFT OVER FROM SACRIFICES TO PAGAN IDOLS. THE REAL QUESTION HERE IS NOT ABOUT THE MEAT ITSELF, BUT THE STRENGTH OF THE COMMUNITY: "FOOD WILL NOT BRING US CLOSER TO GOD."**

**IT IS LOVE THAT BINDS THE COMMUNITY TOGETHER, AND CONCERN FOR OTHERS TAKES PRECEDENCE OVER**

INDIVIDUAL PREFERENCES. IT IS A SIN AGAINST THE MEMBER OF THE COMMUNITY AS WELL AS CHRIST TO LEAD OTHERS TO ACTIONS AGAINST THEIR CONSCIENCE. THERE WILL ALWAYS BE DIFFERENCES OF OPINION; WE ARE CALLED TO TAKE THE VIEWPOINTS OF ALL MEMBERS OF THE COMMUNITY INTO CONSIDERATION AND REFLECT CHRIST'S LOVE. PAUL WARNS THAT KNOWLEDGE WITHOUT LOVE LEADS TO ARROGANCE. "KNOWLEDGE PUFFS UP BUT LOVE BUILDS UP."

MANY PEOPLE IN JESUS TIME AND THROUGH THE CENTURIES STILL BELIEVE THAT JESUS WAS ONLY A GREAT PROPHET AND THAT HIS DISCIPLES WERE SIMPLY LESSER ONES – BUT LETS TALK ABOUT THE PROPHETS OF TODAY – (AND WHEN I USE THE WORD PROPHET OR PROPHETIC I AM NOT TALKING ABOUT SOMEONE WHO SEES INTO THE FUTURE) I WONDER IF SOME OF TODAY'S' PROPHETS ALLOW THE CYNICISM, THE BRASHNESS OF THE WORLD, TO SHAKE THEIR CONFIDENCE AND STIFLE THEIR WILLINGNESS TO SPEAK OUT.

I THINK MANY OF US ARE NUDGED BY GOD TO BE PROPHETS, BUT WE SPEAK TOO SOFTLY OR ONLY TO THOSE WHO WILL HEAR US AND SAY “YES, YOUR RIGHT...WE SHOULD DO SOMETHING.” WHY OUR RELUCTANCE? PROBABLY BECAUSE PROPHETS AREN'T TREATED ANY BETTER NOW THAN THEY WERE IN JESUS' TIME AND BEFORE. PROPHETS WERE OFTEN TORMENTED, RIDICULED, CHASED OUT OF THE AREA – AND IN WORST CASES, KILLED.

ISN'T IT SAD THAT OFTEN WHEN WE SEE AND HEAR TRUTH, TRANSPARENCY, INTEGRITY – WE ARE *ASTONISHED*? THESE CHARACTERISTICS SHOULD BE THE NORM – BUT WE SHAKE OUR HEADS, THINKING ABOUT WHAT WE HEAR AND READ DAILY IN OUR OWN WORLD.

HAVE YOU FELT NUDGED BY GOD TO BE PROPHETIC? FEAR NOT! GOD'S AUTHORITY IS WITH YOU! WE ARE NOT LEFT ALONE TO FACE THE WORLD ALONE. GOD WILL GIVE US THE WORDS TO SPEAK WHAT GOD HAS PUT IN OUR HEART. IF WE LISTEN, WE WILL HEAR THAT AUTHORITY COME THROUGH US AND WE WILL NOT BE LEFT ALONE TO FACE THE CONSEQUENCES.

**LOOK AT YOUR WORLD. WHAT NEEDS A WORD OF COMFORT,  
A WORD OF REMINDER, A WORD OF LEADERSHIP? GOD MAY  
BE CALLING YOU TO SPEAK IT NOW. GO AHEAD, ASTONISH  
PEOPLE! AMEN**