

Trinity Church
February 1, 2009

Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany
RCL, Year B, 4 Epiphany

A Sermon Preached by The Rev. James C. Ransom

*Your touch, O Jesus, has still its ancient power,
No word from you can fruitless fall;
Hear, in this solemn Sunday hour,
And in your mercy, heal us all.
Amen.*

The healing power and authority of Jesus – the mercy of God, in Christ, to heal us all. That is what today's passage from Mark's Gospel is all about. And despite the obstacles that Mark's story presents to us, we can by God's grace step through them to embrace the touch of Jesus that has still its ancient power, and find healing, even for ourselves.

When God's people were about to cross over the Jordan into the promised Canaan land, knowing that Moses would not go with them as God's law-giver and prophet, the people were afraid. The experience of God at Mount Sinai was so terrifying, the presence of God so overwhelming, that they were convinced that if they would ever see God's glory like that again they would all surely die. The voice of the Lord was so intense that it would disintegrate them all. If leaving Moses behind meant that they would have to experience God face to face, they would not cross the river. The promise would be unfulfilled.

God realized that the people's fear was legitimate. God says, "I will raise up for them a prophet like you, Moses, from among God's own people! I will put my words in the prophet's mouth, who shall speak to the people what I command." With this promise, the people crossed the Jordan.

God has not failed in God's promise. God has raised up prophets to speak God's word to the people – a word they cannot speak themselves – but a word from God spoken through the prophet. The prophets have been many and varied: from Deborah to King David, from Amos to Isaiah, from Jonah to Jeremiah, from Samson to Samuel, they are the means by which God's word was spoken to the people. And to us.

When Jesus entered the synagogue in Capernaum on the Sabbath, he took the scroll and read from it, just as the scribes and rabbis did, and he began to teach, just as the scribes and rabbis did. But when Jesus spoke, it was not like scribes, who taught about God, who taught about scripture, who merely interpreted the prophets. When Jesus spoke, it was the Word of God itself. The voice of a true prophet of God. Jesus didn't talk about God, he was God's voice, he was God's Word, he was God's commanding presence, as astounding and deafeningly clear as on Mount Sinai. They were astonished at his glory. No word from you, Jesus, can fruitless fall. To stand before Jesus is to stand before God's promise to raise up a prophet even greater than Moses from among the people, to speak no human word, but the Word of God. Jesus was the Word of God. Jesus is the Word of God, in whose presence nothing unclean can stand.

Mark is a very clever story-teller. He knows us so well. He knows that we want to hear God's Word. We really do want to hear the voice of God spoken through the prophets, but we don't want to be changed by it; we want to interpret it, we want to learn about it, we want even to disagree with it if it suits us. But we don't want to be embraced by it, consumed by it, transfigured by its glory. And so we cry out, "Jesus of Nazareth, what have you to do with us? Have you come to destroy us? We know who you are, the Holy One of God."

We love the demons who live so comfortably in our souls, C.S. Lewis says. The evil that lurks within us prevents us from truly worshiping God; it chokes our true personhood, binds us from partaking of goodness, separates us from the union with God, and from one another. Evil is like a screwtape worm that burrows within and silently kills the one who nourishes it. Lewis named his devil Screwtape.

When Scott Peck was writing his most compelling book, *People of the Lie: The Hope for Healing Human Evil*, he was grasping for a working definition of evil. Scott's eight-year-old son was puzzled that his Dad found this so complicated. He explained simply, "Daddy, evil is just 'live' spelled backward." Just so, Peck realized – evil and goodness are linked as life and death, and they come face to face in the synagogue at Capernaum. The evil wants to turn itself backwards, turn away in order to live in the void of goodness. But evil has no life of its own. Like a demon, it is only a parasite on the good. Evil has no substance of its own, but is a deprivation, an absence, a cavity devoid of goodness, ready to be filled. The soul is a hollow within our being, which God fills.

At Capernaum, Jesus fills the hollow within with the glorifying and transfiguring Word and the demons flee from this overwhelming goodness. The hollow of the human soul is filled with the glory of God, and our tongues are freed to worship him, and to marvel at his authority over us, and goodness in us.

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