

FOURTH SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY, B
Deuteronomy 18:15-20
Psalm 111
I Corinthians 8:1-13
Mark 1:21-28

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Who has the authority to set things right? It's a question that whispers through our consciousness when we hear about layoffs and foreclosures and bankruptcies... *who has the authority to set things right?* It whispers through our confusion and sadness over the random shooting downtown this week... *who has the authority to set things right?* It whispers through reports of a changing climate and endangered planet... *who has the authority to set things right?*

Authority is double-edged in our culture. In the independent-minded Northwest there are many people who pride themselves on "questioning authority" – but like all people we also crave stability, and we need authorities we can trust and depend on. They can be hard to find. We won't be looking to Rod Blagoyevich to model trustworthy authority! Or to Wall Street. And how are we to process the questions that surround our mayor, his distortion of the truth, the possible abuse of a young person... *Who has the authority to set things right?* On inauguration day it seemed that many people's yearnings were palpable, in a time of struggle for our nation, yearning for someone to act with authority to set things right.

Another sign of our yearning happened just a few days before, in the way people around the world reacted to that spectacular airplane rescue on the Hudson River. It spoke to the whole world's imagination-- the expert landing, the way the captain personally walked the aisle two times, checking every seat to be sure everyone was out before he left the sinking plane. Everything worked together for good on that day. And how satisfying it was to see people acting responsibly, decisively, capably, *using their authority to set things right.*

In Jesus' day the people of Israel were looking for *someone with authority to set things right.* They were looking for Messiah, the promised one from God. They often imagined Messiah as a political figure who would liberate them from Rome, set them free from suffering and make a new life possible. But it was also a wider hope, beyond expression really, for divine authority to set things right.

There were signs in Jesus' ministry that he could be the promised one, someone able to act with God's authority. Here at the beginning of Mark's gospel the signs appear. Today we see Jesus demonstrating that he has authority over evil (casting out a demon). In later verses we see his authority over illness (healing people); his

authority over nature (stilling the storm); and finally his authority over death (raising a young girl who has died).

It began with a showdown between good and evil. I can't help wondering whether the disturbed man who confronted Jesus in the synagogue could have been someone like Erik Ayala, the troubled young man who took his life and the lives of two girls this week. The thing about that terrible shooting is, it just doesn't make any kind of sense. We don't know how to process that kind of tragedy.

In Jesus' day, their way of processing it was to say, a greater power must be at work. What we describe as mental illness, they understood to be the work of Satan. Notice the Bible doesn't call the man himself an evil or unclean person. It says an unclean spirit has robbed him of health. To Jesus he was a precious child of God who needed to be set free.

And when it came to that showdown between good and evil, Jesus acted responsibly, decisively, and capably to free that poor man. Jesus showed his authority over whatever endangers or diminishes human life, and showed he is willing to *use his authority to set things right*.

In scripture, authority is always subject to the rule of love. Jesus says those who follow him are not to use their power to lord it over others, but to serve. Remember how he knelt to wash the disciples feet, how he taught them, "the greatest among you must be servants." Authority and power are always to be used for God's purpose of compassion, healing, and mercy.

Here in Jesus we see it – the authority of the universe turned to the purpose of compassion, healing and mercy. And we will see it continuing to be acted out all through Jesus' life, even to the cross, as he gives his life for the healing of all.

Jesus set things right in that synagogue, but *who has the authority to set things right*, in our time? I don't think anyone is expecting a Messiah to swoop in and exorcise the demons that are possessing our worldwide economy. Or somehow instantly heal our planet from the wounds we've inflicted. We have long since moved beyond any kind of easy answers. We're not looking for Superman, but we do believe that the Jesus who brings salvation through his servant ministry continues to be at work today— yes, saving this world— yes, leading it toward wholeness— even today, and even through us and through our serving.

In the face of complex problems, it seems clear that the way into our future will have to come step by step, choice by choice, and that each of us has a part to play. As Christians, we believe the kinds of steps we're meant to take are shown in some way through what we see in Jesus.

We are meant to use our authority in the way Christ used his authority -- for the purpose of compassion, healing, and mercy. Not to raise ourselves up, but to serve. And when we do, we will need to confront evil in some way.

Because the truth is, we struggle against evil every day, on both a personal and public level. People who live with depression know how they wrestle daily between despair and hope. People fighting addictions know they must choose daily between what destroys life and what affirms life. People who are raising kids are well aware that there are life-giving and life-destroying forces continually vying for our children's loyalty (and our own loyalty too).

The power of evil is real, but here is the good news: *There is someone who has the authority to set things right* – and that is our Living God.

God has acted with authority in Jesus Christ to set this world free from everything that diminishes life. Even from the power of sin. Even from death itself. God has won the victory in Christ. So we can say it with trust and conviction: Love is stronger than hate. Life is stronger than death. God claims us forever, God loves us beyond our sin, and God stands with us against everything that diminishes life.

Strong in this, we are empowered to keep on serving the way Christ served. Giving our energies to compassion and healing and mercy, partnering with God. We can keep on saying no to greed and dishonesty, and instead say yes to a life that is grateful for every blessing and shares generously with others. We keep saying no to a culture of violence and cruelty, and instead say yes to a way of life that actively promotes peace. We say no to a culture that distorts the gift of sexuality in a multitude of ways, using people as objects – we say yes to a way of living that protects the vulnerable and promotes respect and dignity for every person. We say no to the fear and anxiety and worry that can threaten to paralyze us in the face of global problems, and yes to a stance of steadfast trust in God and commitment to do what we can, day by day, to heal the earth and care for God's world, to pray for our leaders and keep on pressing forward as wisely as we all are able.

Who has the authority to set things right? God does. And God is acting decisively, even today, to heal what is wounded, to set free what is captive, to lift up what is bowed down. God is working to restore life, even through you and me. Thanks be to God. Amen.