

Epiphany 4 (B)
January 29, 2012
Text: Mark 1:21-28

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During our recent bit of cold weather, I had stayed up late reading one night and peeked out the kitchen window before going to bed. Our house is between two rather widely spaced street lights, and sometimes at night it can be so dark that it's difficult to see anything. It feels as if the asphalt on the street soaks up every bit of light, plunging everything into deep darkness. But that night, snow had blanketed the neighborhood, and the street and the yard and the sidewalk and the bushes and everything reflected the soft pink glow of the street lights. It was as if every flake of snow had become a tiny lamp, with light shining everywhere and pouring in through the kitchen window. It was almost magical.

For the Church, these Sundays after Epiphany are the season of light. The light began to shine from the star that led the wise men to Bethlehem. And it shone through every word that Jesus spoke and every act to bring the reign of God to life. And this light is still shining to reveal Jesus so we can recognize him for who he is—God's own son, who brings blessing and peace, who embodies God's desire to draw the whole human family into the embrace of God's love. The light shines to lead us to turn to Christ in faith, to know him as Savior and Teacher and Lord.

This morning the light shines through our Gospel story, which reports a startling thing that happened when the community gathered for worship in Capernaum. Jesus was teaching, when suddenly a man with an unclean spirit started shouting and crying out, and Jesus cast the spirit out, setting the man free from its malignant power and flooding his life with the light of wholeness and freedom—and, in the process, amazing everyone there. Now, for us, perhaps this story isn't just startling, but downright strange. And maybe the gospel light that shines from it seems more murky than illuminating. Hollywood has so caricatured the idea of demon possession that it most likely seems to us like something from another world. It certainly isn't like anything we've ever witnessed.

But listen again, because I'm convinced that the incident this story reports isn't that different from things we experience every day. We know people who have been wounded by life, but whose wounds aren't on the outside. They carry wounds of mind and spirit, wounds that prevent them from living full and rewarding lives. And we know people who have been possessed by some desire, or anger, or envy, or resentment. They are so possessed and preoccupied that they can never live freely and joyfully. And we know people who have been taken over by unclean things like alcohol or drugs or gambling or pornography. Their choices in life are limited and their vision of life is distorted by an addiction that keeps them captive. Perhaps even you or I have experienced the pull and attraction of something that makes us less free, less whole, less the person God created us to be.

Jesus comes to us, to our friends and neighbors, just like he came to that worship service in Capernaum, to shine light into every musty corner of our lives. He comes to announce the freedom and joy of life with God. He calls us to follow his way of forgiveness and compassion, and to delight in the life we were created for.

Sometimes it may be every bit as dramatic as our gospel story. I know people whose lives have been suddenly and profoundly changed by Jesus. A friend who was fearful and anxious and carried a huge burden of self-doubt was positively liberated by Jesus' word of forgiveness received in one powerful conversation with a Christian friend. I also know many, many people for whom receiving Christ's liberation is a life-long process, in fact it's probably true for most of us. It might look like regularly attending a 12-step group to take hold of that freedom, or coming to church faithfully to have heart and mind and spirit reshaped and renewed by Jesus' life-giving values and priorities, week by week by week. For most people it looks like slipping into the shadows time and again, and being drawn back to the glow of God's presence time and again. Thank God we have that kind of Lord, who walks with us, stays with us, who always brings light to our human darkness.

Jesus comes to us, just as he came to that worship service in Capernaum so long ago. And he comes with the greatest gifts we could hope for—our own true life, set free and immersed in God's great love. He speaks his word of forgiveness and healing to us, he calls us to follow him, so that every one of us can shine, so that as the community of God's people together, the light can pour through us, and make of us something luminous. Almost magical. Thanks be to God. Amen