

4 Epiphany Year B

January 29, 2012

St. Luke ELCA Sheboygan Falls

Mark 1:21-28

### Relevant Worship

Let us pray. Lord, even as you were present teaching and healing your people with authority and compassion when you walked the earth, open our hearts to believe you can free us from our demons to spread your Word of hope today. AMEN.

I suppose it started like an ordinary Sabbath day service in the Capernaum synagogue. As the people of the worshipping community gathered together I imagine there must have been many of the thoughts and feelings you may have as you get ready to come to church any given Sunday.

Perhaps they were there because it was the thing that religious people were expected to do, or to see friends and catch up on the news, or to receive encouragement from God's Word to get through the trials of

the week, or give praise and thanks to God or maybe, just maybe it felt relevant to their daily lives and they truly believed that they would encounter God there. Is one of those the reason why you find yourself here this morning?

On that particular Sabbath morning there was a new preacher in town. His name was Jesus of Nazareth. There may have been just a touch of excitement in the air to here someone with a fresh perspective, not the same old rabbi. Then Jesus began to speak and the energy started to build in the room. They could hear the buzz: "***He taught them as one having authority and not as their scribes.***"

More and more today. It's hard to command authority, the right to be heard. It doesn't necessarily come by virtue of standing up in a pulpit of having a string of degrees behind one's name. When people have limited time and energy to devote to various commitments in life, often it comes

down to relevance. How does what we are hearing and doing relate to how I live out my life in the world?

Is it still possible to “do church” and present faith and the ways of God in a way that gives meaning and significance to work, school, family and other aspects of Monday through Saturday? When I look out at the pews some Sundays I wonder. Lots of people are making other choices. Maybe soccer is more important, or sleep or a job that requires weekend hours or precious family time.

Our baptism dad said that he once watched an episode of the Tim Allen show, Home Improvement where the whole family was going to church. One of the kids argued that he didn't have to go to church to believe in God. That thought made an impression on him. The gospel according to Home Improvement. Yet there is a reason he desires his kids to be baptized and find that church connection because it is still relevant.

God is out in the world, but God also draws us together here to hear God's Word in community and to shape and support one another in our lives of faith. God doesn't want us to walk the walk all alone.

In today's Gospel, a man entered the synagogue with an unclean spirit, all of his demons were there for everyone to see. Most people nowadays are better at keeping our secrets under wraps. We may not wear our “Sunday best” clothes anymore, but we may think we need to put on our “Sunday best” attitude. Nobody wants to reveal their dark side.

It seems to me that church could be a much more relevant place if we knew it was a safe place to openly share our questions and our doubts about God and trust that we would be accepted no matter what our hidden demons and fears might be. Where in the past authority was claimed by one leader standing up to proclaim a relevant Word. Could it be that for this generation authority

must first be earned through a willingness to quietly listen and seek to understand? ore I thought about the lessons for today, the more I realized that they were about responding to God's call in our lives. In Mark's gospel, the original disciples offer an intimidating example. Jesus calls, "**Follow me.**" And immediately, they drop their fishing nets and follow.

Very few of us, I'd reckon, would be able to simply pull up stakes and leave our lives at a moments' notice. I had a few seminary friends who left careers behind, one was in law enforcement, another an aerospace engineer at Boeing, but they didn't leave everything behind. Somehow they convinced their wives and kids to come with them. It seems like in today's complicated world, people are entangled in much more than fishing nets. What entangles you and keeps you from living into the fullness of who God wants you to be?

The disciples are a tough act to follow in that regard, but the lectionary compilers also saw fit to give us Jonah. It's amusing that the part of the story that we see in the lectionary is slanted to make Jonah look like a roaring success.

Jonah cried out: "**40 days more and Nineveh shall be overthrown!**" **And the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth. When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed His mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them; and he didn't do it.**"

What an amazing triumph for Jonah. Not only did the Ninevites repent, but God changed His mind about destroying them because of what Jonah accomplished. If all we had to go on of the story of Jonah was what we see here, he would be the most successful of prophets. Except for three

intriguing words: *“a second time.”* This wasn't the only time God called on Jonah to do him a solid.

In Jonah Chapter 1 verse 1 it says:  
*“The word of the LORD came to Jonah...  
'Go to that great city of Nineveh and  
preach against it, because its wickedness  
has come up before me.’*

What did Jonah do then? The first time God called him? Did Jonah say, “Here I am, send me!” Nope. Jonah headed in the opposite direction!

Search your life a bit. Have you ever had a time when you felt like God wanted you to do something and you did just the opposite? Hmmm. I wonder, how did that work out for you? It may even be related to what you are doing with your life right now.

I love Jonah because he isn't so different from many of us. He thinks through what God may be asking of him and he calculates the cost is too high. He's afraid

to face up to his country's worst enemies and even worse, he hates the idea that God loves them too and would even consider giving them another chance. So he runs. He hops on a ship going in the opposite direction.

Jonah got on this ship headed for the wrong place and a violent storm threatens the ship and all its passengers and crew. Everyone turns to Jonah to do something because he had told them he was fleeing God and they figured he had done something pretty nasty to get God so ticked off.

Now here is the point at which I realize that most likely this story is not meant to be taken literally. It is a fable, a funny little story intended to teach the hearers a lesson. Jonah suggests that the only way to calm down the sea is to toss him overboard!?! Really, Jonah?!

At first the crew does their best to row ashore and avoid murder, but in the end, they do as Jonah suggested and the sea stopped raging.

So is this the end of Jonah? Is he doomed to be killed by the crashing waves never to fulfill his God-given mission? No—we haven't even gotten to the chapter printed in today's bulletin!

Jonah 1:17: ***“And God provided a great fish to swallow Jonah, and Jonah was inside the fish three days and three nights.”*** While he was inside the fish (I told you this was a fable) he had the chance to ask God for forgiveness and to promise to follow God's will, even though he wasn't happy about it. The fish spits Jonah out and off he goes for his second chance.

Now I'm pretty sure that the writer of Jonah isn't suggesting that we should expect a giant fish to rescue us when our own choices get us in trouble. However, the

story shows us that we can head quite a bit off course in life and God will give us the opportunity to turn around; even when some folks might think that we are beyond the point of no return. Somehow God got Jonah to where he needed to be, in spite of himself.

There are times in life when our detours lead us to our final destinations. I've known of people who have attended spiritual retreats looking for refreshment and end up with a calling to some kind of ministry. The pull of the demand to fish for people was too strong.

Whether you are like the fishermen who leap before they look into fishing for people, or like Jonah, who resisted with every fiber of his being to the very end, God calls you to follow and to share the Word and can use you to make a difference.  
AMEN.

