



## Liturgical Day: The Fourth Sunday after Epiphany

Date: February 1, 2009

Sermon Title: The Healing Power

*synagogue teacher  
one having authority  
source of healing strength*

Grace to you and peace, from God our Father, and the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Martin Luther's belief in the power of God's word is legendary. Luther was an Old Testament professor, and familiar with these words from the Prophet Isaiah:

*For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there until they have watered the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.* (Isaiah 55:10-11)

These words inspired him to write the third stanza of his most familiar hymn, *A Mighty Fortress Is Our God*.

*Though hoards of devils fill the land, all threatening to devour us.  
We tremble not, unmoved we stand; they cannot overpower us.  
Let this world's tyrant rage; in battle we'll engage!  
His might is doomed to fail; God's judgment must prevail!  
One little word subdues them.*

Martin Luther had a deep belief in the power of God's word, and I am quite convinced that he was on to something. I have been amazed to see how God's word, when spoken at the right moment, can release people from what binds them, can help them to offer and to receive forgiveness, can inspire and encourage, can renew broken relationships, can bring hope and strength and new life to people. God's word is remarkably powerful, and that conviction lies very close to the center of what it means to be a Lutheran Christian.

We witness the power of the word at the very beginning of Mark's Gospel account. As Jesus is teaching in the synagogue, a man suddenly appears and shouts out: *What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God.*

Jesus walks over to the man, looks him straight in the eyes, and says with conviction: *Be silent, and come out of him!* What happens next is as frightening as it is powerful. The unclean spirit convulsed that man, throwing him to the ground. As it leaves him, it cries out with a loud and terrible voice. The reader is left to assume that the man all of a sudden becomes just one of the folks – as normal as the rest of them – and once again able to join society.

What we're reading here is a story about the power of God's word. Jesus simply says: *Be silent and come out of him!* and the man's years of torment are over. The unclean spirit leaves him. One little word (well, seven words actually – or five in the Greek New Testament). The unclean spirit is subdued, and unable to overcome that man any more.

But this text is more than a reminder that God's word is powerful. It is also a reminder of just how powerful God's word is. The power in God's word is not simply that it helps us to a deeper understanding of our world and our faith

FIRST LESSON  
DEUTERONOMY 18:15-20

PSALM  
PSALM 111

SECOND LESSON  
1<sup>ST</sup> CORINTHIANS 8:1-13

GOSPEL LESSON  
ST. MARK 1:21-28

PRAYER OF THE DAY  
COMPASSIONATE GOD, YOU  
GATHER THE WHOLE  
UNIVERSE INTO YOUR  
RADIANT PRESENCE AND  
CONTINUALLY REVEAL YOUR  
SON AS OUR SAVIOR. BRING  
WHOLENESS TO ALL THAT IS  
BROKEN AND SPEAK TRUTH TO  
US IN YOUR CONFUSION,  
THAT ALL CREATION WILL SEE  
YOU AND KNOW YOUR SON,  
JESUS CHRIST, OUR SAVIOR  
AND LORD. AMEN.

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God's work. Our hands.

(although that certainly happens). It also has the capacity to make profound changes in our lives. Here Jesus speaks the word, and a man who has been assigned as insane by his fellow citizens is dramatically healed. A man who has been excluded from society is immediately restored. It is a phenomenal story. It shows the miraculous, healing power of God's word.

These days, when we discuss faith healing, the image that comes to mind is that of some religious charlatan, dressed in a white suit, shouting from a television screen. There are those who believe that they've discovered some method or formula that lets them determine when and where God's healing power will move. We are naturally skeptical of such claims, and we should be.

It is foolish to profess the ability to control God's power. We can't conjure it up any more than we can conjure up a wind storm or a sunrise. That's one thing we know to be true about the Spirit – it blows where it wills, and we can neither anticipate it nor direct it. But the existence of such claims doesn't negate the power of God's ability. We do profess God's ability to heal, to renew, to make a difference in people's lives. Time and time again our Scriptures testify to this reality. And countless Christians today demonstrate that God continues to move in our world.

Late last night I returned from a trip to Richmond, Virginia. I was there to preside at the funeral of my aunt, Betty Risendal, who died on January 14<sup>th</sup> – her ninetieth birthday. Betty had been relatively healthy, right up through Christmas. But in the days following Christmas, she suffered a series of strokes, that were just too much for her ninety-year-old body. I wish someone had come along and healed her. I wish I could have traveled to Richmond to visit with her, instead of to participate in her memorial. That didn't happen, of course. There is a mystery as to when the power of God moves, and when a person experiences the gift of healing.

But the fact that Aunt Betty didn't recover from her strokes doesn't mean that there wasn't a healing powering Richmond this past week. There was healing power in the presence of family members who traveled from Los Angeles, Denver and Minneapolis to be with Betty's family. There was healing power as this group sat around the table on Thursday evening and remembered Betty, and the ways that she had touched our lives. There was healing power as friends from church and friends from the neighborhood generously supported Betty's family with phone calls, greeting cards, meals, and offers to house those of us who were visiting from out of town. There was healing power as words of comfort and hope were spoken at Betty's grave site, in Arlington National Cemetery, overlooking downtown Washington DC and the mall. There was healing power that truly made a difference in the lives of those who were closest to my Aunt Betty, and those of us who are people of faith know and understand that this healing power is born of the Holy Spirit – a gift from God. That healing power was and is an important way that God helped them make it through this past week – and it is just as real, and just as inspiring, as would have been the case if Betty had been healed in a way that allowed her to recover from those strokes.

During our catechism gatherings, we occasionally sing a Jay Beech song that is one of my favorites. The words go:

*We are the church; the body of our Lord.  
We are all God's children. We have been restored.*<sup>i</sup>

This song calls us to remember that we are the body of our Lord in the world today. There will be those times when God's power moves in mysterious ways. There will be occasions when healing happens, and even the brightest of experts cannot understand why. When those extraordinary events take place, we are awed at God's power, and are grateful for God's grace. But more often – we might even say "most often" – it is that case that healing comes through the body of Christ: through you and me. Through our presence. Through our kindness. Through our generosity. Through our faithful attempts to share the good news. In these, and many ways, the healing power of God's presence continues to move through the body of Christ – through you and me – and makes a difference in the lives of those who are in need.

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<sup>i</sup> *We Are the Church*, Words and Music by Jay Beech. Copyright ©1988.

I know that happens through Saint Peter over and over again, in stories that few of us ever hear. I also know that happens here at Saint Peter through deliberate attempts to be the presence of Christ for one another. When a ministry team pauses for "highs and lows" and prayers before they begin their business. When a trained Stephen minister spends an hour in prayer and conversation with a care receiver. When a staff member receives a phone call during the week, and offers words of comfort and hope to someone on the other end of the call. In each of these situations we are the church, the body of our Lord. In each of these situations Christ is as present today as he was in the lives of his first century listeners. In each of these situations the Spirit moves, and hearts are healed.

There is a power in the presence of Christ, and it is a healing power. You and I, when we reach out in love and care, become vehicles of that healing power. May this be the kind of congregation where those who are troubled can be present in our midst, just as that man was in the synagogue that day. May this be the kind of congregation where the presence of Jesus is known, just as it was in the synagogue that day. May this be the kind of congregation where the healing power of God touches hearts and lives, and makes them well again. What better way could there be for us to respond to this morning's Gospel lesson?

Amen.

David J. Risendal, Pastor (February 1, 2009)

English Text: <sup>ii</sup>

<sup>1:21</sup> They went to Capernaum; and when the Sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught. <sup>22</sup> They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes. <sup>23</sup> Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, <sup>24</sup> and he cried out, "What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God." <sup>25</sup> But Jesus rebuked him, saying, "Be silent, and come out of him!" <sup>26</sup> And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him. <sup>27</sup> They were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, "What is this? A new teaching-with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him." <sup>28</sup> At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee. <sup>iii</sup>

Greek Text:

<sup>1:21</sup> Καὶ εἰσπορεύονται εἰς Καφαρναοὺμ καὶ εὐθὺς τοῖς σάββασιν εἰσελθὼν εἰς τὴν συναγωγὴν ἐδίδασκεν. <sup>22</sup> καὶ ἐξεπλήσσοντο ἐπὶ τῇ διδαχῇ αὐτοῦ ἦν γὰρ διδάσκων αὐτοὺς ὡς ἐξουσίαν ἔχων καὶ οὐχ ὡς οἱ γραμματεῖς. <sup>23</sup> Καὶ εὐθὺς ἦν ἐν τῇ συναγωγῇ αὐτῶν ἄνθρωπος ἐν πνεύματι ἀκαθάρτῳ καὶ ἀνέκραξεν <sup>24</sup> λέγων τί ἡμῖν καὶ σοί, Ἰησοῦ Ναζαρηνέ; ἦλθες ἀπολέσαι ἡμᾶς; οἶδα σε τίς εἶ, ὁ γιος τοῦ θεοῦ. <sup>25</sup> καὶ ἐπετίμησεν αὐτῷ ὁ Ἰησοῦς λέγων φιμώθητι καὶ ξελθε ἐξ αὐτοῦ. <sup>26</sup> καὶ σπαράξαν αὐτὸν τὸ πνεῦμα τὸ ἀκάθαρτον καὶ φωνήσαν φωνῇ μεγάλη ἐξῆλθεν ἐξ αὐτοῦ. <sup>27</sup> καὶ ἐθαμβήθησαν πάντες ὥστε συζητεῖν πρὸς ἑαυτοὺς λέγοντας τί ἐστὶν τοῦτο; διδαχὴ καινὴ κατ' ἐξουσίαν καὶ τοῖς πνεύμασι τοῖς ἀκαθάρτοις ἐπιτάσσει, καὶ ὑπακούουσιν αὐτῷ. <sup>28</sup> καὶ ἐξῆλθεν ἡ ἀκοὴ αὐτοῦ εὐθὺς πανταχοῦ εἰς τὴν περιχωρον τῆς Γαλιλαίας. <sup>iv</sup>

<sup>ii</sup> A list of Bible lessons for the coming weeks is available at [http://www.elca.org/dcm/worship/church\\_year/lectionary.html](http://www.elca.org/dcm/worship/church_year/lectionary.html).

<sup>iii</sup> St. Mark 1:21-28, New Revised Standard Version Bible (© 1989, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America).

<sup>iv</sup> St. Mark 1:21-28, The Greek New Testament, Aland, Kurt, Black, Matthew, Martini, Carlo M., Metzger, Bruce M., and Wikgren, Allen, (© 1983, Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft Stuttgart).