

Sermon Epiphany 4B 1.28.2024. Fr. Nick Smith

*In the Name of God who makes us, loves us, and Keeps us, Amen.*

Each of our 4 Gospels in the New Testament begins with an attempt to disclose the true identity of Jesus, mysterious as it is, and to provide irrefutable evidence to the skeptic and reassuring evidence to the faithful. Our readings are from Mark now, but you may recall how John's Gospel uses a poetic approach "In the beginning there was the Word, and the word was with God, and the word was God...". In Matthew and Luke, we have the Christmas narratives, genealogies, and elaborate descriptions of Jesus' baptism and temptation in the wilderness. But in Mark, the earliest Gospel which survived, the language is terse and to the point. Jesus, writes Mark, only has to say, "Follow me and I will make you fish for people," and random fishermen recognize his identity and immediately become his disciples. In today's reading from Mark, Jesus' identity is revealed by the authority of his teaching, and the evidence is provided by the amazement of those worshiping in the synagogue, and also by an unclean spirit who has possessed a man in their midst. This demon-spirit blurts 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."

It is interesting how much significance a recognizable name has in the Bible. We are told that knowing someone's name in the Ancient Near east, a world populated primarily by insignificant, almost anonymous peasants, brought power. Being able to name someone, it is thought, gave power over that person; but it also seems to have given power *to* that person as well. A well-known name lifted a person out of the general masses, making him or her paradoxically both a target and a player at the same time. You may remember from our Advent stories how the Angel Gabriel was charged with telling Mary and Joseph to name their child Jesus, suggesting that Jesus was already known in the spirit realm, and that the power which surrounded his identity should now, by incarnation, ascend in the physical world as well. He should be the Messiah in both realms simultaneously; target and master, victim and victor in each, the Son of God *and* the Son of Man. The unclean spirit recognizes him, both as Jesus of Nazareth and as the Holy one of God, and names him aloud in the synagogue, perhaps expecting to have power over him by saying his name. No such luck...naming Jesus gives instead the power to cleanse and heal.

When our daughter Olivia had graduated from Nazareth College in Rochester, she decided to do something rather brave, I thought, and volunteered for the Episcopal Corps. This is a program not unlike the America Corps of which you may have heard. It is a program organized to gather educated, and committed young people to spend a year interning for various non-profits around the country. When she enrolled as a volunteer, she was given a choice of several US locations, and choose Washington DC. The system works something like this: Along with six other volunteers from around the country, she was housed in what appeared to be an former rectory next to a church which had been remodeled enough so that each had sleeping space and bathroom access and served as a dormitory under the supervision of that local Episcopal Church. The seven were to live together as a community family, sharing meals and expenses and experiences for the year. None were independently wealthy, none had cars, and all were expected to survive on a stipend of \$300 a month each. From that stipend, they were each expected to donate \$11 per week towards the groceries for the house.

As the seven volunteers arrived that August, they attended some community and spiritual building activities, and the pastor of the neighboring church met with the group frequently during the year as a spiritual advisor. The intent was to build a strong 'covenant group', the members of which could trust each other and form a common bond around their wish to serve the area, offering their time and talents to persons with various needs. Each of the seven chose a different non-profit from a short list, and committed to a full-time work on its behalf. One worked with troubled youth, another with disadvantaged preschoolers, and so on. Olivia chose to work for the DC Area Food Bank, and became their site inspector, traveling around DC in a

provided vehicle to make sure that the feeding sites, mostly schools, were correctly storing and distributing the food provided. For their own weekly food two of the seven housemates would together take a bus on Saturdays to a supermarket and purchase what they could afford for the week, spending the \$77 dollars collected and no more. It was a frugal lifestyle. Livi chose to take an apple and a peanut butter sandwich for lunch each day, and when we asked her why she didn't add jelly, she said that they couldn't afford the extra expense. And, in any case, she implied, this whole experience wasn't about them, but about the value of the work they were performing for their fellow Americans. Any sacrifice on their part was expected to be swallowed as part of their civic duty. Nonetheless, when Gale and I visited, we would pack the van with bulk supplies, like toilet paper, as a gift to this small, courageous, dedicated crew. And, I must say that their experiment in family living was impressive, and largely without friction. There was, however, one kerfuffle which perked up my ears:

The group ate their evening meals together, family style, at a given time each day, and each of the seven was expected to offer the prayer of grace on a rotating basis. With such a limited food supply and such an effort to bring it all together in the midst of the challenging daily volunteer tasks each had endured, asking God's grace together as they assembled for sharing seemed especially appropriate and meaningful. Interestingly, though, despite the fact that the sponsoring organization included the word 'Episcopal' in its title, these young folks came from diverse geographical and church traditions. One was even Jewish. So, when the prayers for the food were said, two of the more Pentecostal members were shocked when others neglected to add 'in Jesus' precious name' to the conclusion of the prayer. They had been raised to believe that such a formulaic was absolutely necessary to make the prayer valid and sincere. A vigorous discussion arose, and the contention was expressed that unless we remember Jesus by name in our prayers, how can we expect him to remember us when we truly need his help and grace.

My Episcopal ears seem to cringe a bit when I hear such a contention, as did my daughter Olivia at the time. It is unsettling to think of Jesus turning his back on our prayers if we neglect to use his name, or that he might just go off and sulk, leaving us to walk our pilgrimage alone. Yet, I challenge you to count up the number of times in our worship services we *do* liturgically pray using his name. Are we taking out some formulaic insurance to guard against abandonment? Are we saying some magical incantation meant to bring us better luck with our requests to the Divine? I don't think so. I think that we include Jesus' precious name in our prayers out of recognition, out of epiphany, that Jesus the Christ would *never* turn his back on us and that he will *always* be our companion and guide. I don't like to use the words *always* and *never* in my preaching BTW, but in this case I am making an exception. Think about it: no sooner does the demon call out Jesus' name and identify him as the Holy One of God than Jesus casts him out.

A name can define an otherwise ambiguous presence, and, Mark tells us that as Jesus' name became more recognized, and more associated with authority, his fame began to spread 'at once' throughout Galilee. The name 'Jesus' and the awesome presence it defines brings amazement to the people. At least ten times in this short Gospel Mark describes the people who experience Jesus first hand as being amazed and astounded and astonished and saying things like "We have never seen anything like this!" It is this name which continues to astound us today; the presence to which it witnesses has the power to straddle with authority all dimensions both seen and unseen, to teach and cleanse and heal, and, by his epiphany, to shine the light of truth into even the darkest corners of our lives. We pray through Jesus with faith and thanksgiving, not because of a threat of what will happen to us if we forget, but because we are amazed and astounded by his unconditional love. Christ, whose glory fills the skies, Christ, the true, the only light, Sun of Righteousness, arise, triumph o'er the shades of night; Dayspring from on high, be near; Daystar, in my heart appear. Amen.