

THE MESSAGE WITH AUTHORITY

20 Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him. 21 He began by saying to them, “Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.”

22 All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his lips. “Isn’t this Joseph’s son?” they asked.

23 Jesus said to them, “Surely you will quote this proverb to me: ‘Physician, heal yourself!’ And you will tell me, ‘Do here in your hometown what we have heard that you did in Capernaum.’”

24 “Truly I tell you,” he continued, “no prophet is accepted in his hometown. 25 I assure you that there were many widows in Israel in Elijah’s time, when the sky was shut for three and a half years and there was a severe famine throughout the land. 26 Yet Elijah was not sent to any of them, but to a widow in Zarephath in the region of Sidon. 27 And there were many in Israel with leprosy in the time of Elisha the prophet, yet not one of them was cleansed—only Naaman the Syrian.” 28 All the people in the synagogue were furious when they heard this. 29 They got up, drove him out of the town, and took him to the brow of the hill on which the town was built, in order to throw him off the cliff. 30 But he walked right through the crowd and went on his way.

31 Then he went down to Capernaum, a town in Galilee, and on the Sabbath he taught the people. 32 They were amazed at his teaching, because his words had authority.

This Gospel lesson begins and ends in Jewish churches called synagogues. Synagogue worship might have seemed familiar to us in some ways. If you were to jump back in time and visit one in Jesus’ day, you would recognize that there were lessons that were read, prayers, a liturgy, and hymns. Usually there was a sermon—but not always. We move in this text from the synagogue in Nazareth where Jesus grew up to the synagogue in Capernaum, about fifteen miles to the northeast.

The people of both places were amazed at Jesus’ preaching. But their amazement came from two very different places in their hearts.

Down in Nazareth, the people knew Jesus. “Isn’t this Joseph’s son?” they said. Of course, we know from the Christmas account that although Joseph, the carpenter of Nazareth, married Jesus’ mother and raised him as his own, he was not Jesus’ biological father. We would call him—what? His stepfather? Jesus’ adoptive father/ His foster father? Something like that. What they meant was that they weren’t going to buy into the idea that he was the Messiah unless he proved it to them with his actions. He might have preached a good sermon—with words about the grace of God—but what about the miracles they’d been hearing about?

Jesus had healed the son of a royal person in Cana. Before that he had changed water into wine. What about a miracle here, Jesus? Your mom is watching! Your brothers and sisters are here!

Jesus knew their hearts. He had already preached with authority, but they wanted him to do tricks for them. He said, “You’re going to say, ‘Physician, heal yourself.’” What does that mean? Well, it means that they thought he should do at home what he did in other places. And it was in this moment that we accompany Jesus as his divine memory, truly God, soars high into the sky and looks back in time to this same place, to Galilee, to other people who rejected the prophets of God. “Remember Elijah?” he asks. “Remember Elisha?” They were prophets who were known mostly up in the northern kingdom, up in Galilee—right here, Nazareth. Did they do any miracles in their time? The Galileans weren’t much different then; not at all. So when Elijah helped a woman in need, it wasn’t even in Galilee or Samaria, but away on the coast, up in Zarephath. When Elisha cured a man of leprosy, it wasn’t anyone from Israel, but a soldier from Israel’s enemies.

Their reaction to this reminder was to drive Jesus out to the edge of the cliff outside of town. It’s a pretty dramatic fall, hundreds of feet down a very steep slope strewn with outcroppings of jagged bedrock and other stones. And here Jesus performed a miracle for the people of Nazareth: he escaped from them by passing through the crowd unharmed.

Let’s fly out to God’s point of view to look at ourselves. Are we tempted to let ourselves be swayed by the increasingly loud shouts of the world around us? The devil is stirring up the crowds of the world like the crowd at a basketball game to such a pitch that the true peaching of the law and gospel can hardly be heard. The world wants us to join along in saying “Nobody’s perfect. We all make mistakes. Who is to judge?”

And the world wants us to say, “We all worship the same God, don’t we?” The pull of these words that reek of the devil’s breath is like the pull of a tide that will carry us out to be lost at sea.

What God is it that we worship? Is it the God that the Nazarene in me wants, the God whose strings I pull and who does whatever I wish; the God who isn’t too tough on my sins because he tolerates me because he, what, because he needs me for his kingdom? Or do I worship the God who sat there in the synagogue telling the people about the grace of God, about prophecies that were fulfilled only in him, and who calls me to follow him?

Do I become angered by Jesus, do I want him to change his views on things in our culture today? Do I want him to relax on the foul language we use in private or at work during the week. Or do we want him to indulge us about coming to church just once in a while?

- Do we struggle with the Fourth Commandment today, especially regarding a President who seems to many to be a chastisement on our nation. How different is this from Paul

telling the Romans to honor and obey their government, the same government that would put both Paul and Peter to death for preaching the gospel?

- Do we struggle with rage, with the growing sexual immorality of our nation and our world that no longer has any sense of decency; that thinks that if a thing exists it must therefore be good and healthy and beneficial to men and women and otherwise?

What did Jesus say about this kind of an attitude? About this kind of a religion? He left. He walked away, right through the crowd, and walked to another town and preached exactly the same thing he had preached in Nazareth.

What happened there, up in Capernaum? The people were amazed with a different kind of amazement. They knew that his message had the authority of God behind it, and they put their trust in Jesus.

His message is repentance and the forgiveness of our sins. His message has never been, “Don’t worry about your sins—God doesn’t really care about that, anyway.” No, no. His message is that our sins, the sins we grieve over and that shock us so much... even these are sins covered by Jesus’ blood on the cross.

What did Paul say in the Epistle lesson? “There is a remnant chosen by grace.” No one makes themselves seem more acceptable to God by ignoring God’s law. No, we are acceptable to God only because of the cross of Jesus, where our sins were atoned for, where we were brought back into God’s family through his blood.

The authority behind all of Jesus’ words and miracles and everything else our Savior did is God his heavenly Father and ours. It is not our place in any way to change God’s mind about sin or about our attitudes or actions. It is our place to change our minds about our sins, to turn away from them, and to change our attitudes and our actions. We want to conform ourselves to God’s holy will.

And what grace, what mercy God has had! He sent his Son Jesus to preach to us, to teach us, and to rescue us, so that we have this lifetime, this time of grace, in which to change; to learn about our Savior, to grow in our faith and to share it. Don’t be afraid to share it: The message, after all, has authority; the authority of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.