

Epiphany 4

Deuteronomy 18:15-20

¹⁵“The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your brothers—it is to him you shall listen— ¹⁶just as you desired of the LORD your God at Horeb on the day of the assembly, when you said, ‘Let me not hear again the voice of the LORD my God or see this great fire any more, lest I die.’ ¹⁷And the LORD said to me, ‘They are right in what they have spoken. ¹⁸I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brothers. And I will put my words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him. ¹⁹And whoever will not listen to my words that he shall speak in my name, I myself will require it of him. ²⁰But the prophet who presumes to speak a word in my name that I have not commanded him to speak, or ²¹who speaks in the name of other gods, that same prophet shall die.’

Psalm 111

¹ Hallelujah! I will give thanks to the LORD with | my whole heart,*
in the assembly of the upright, in the | congregation.

² Great are the deeds | of the LORD! *
They are studied by all who de- | light in them.

³ His work is full of majes- | ty and splendor,*
and his righteousness en- | dures forever.

⁴ He makes his marvelous works to | be remembered;*
the LORD is gracious and full | of compassion.

⁵ He gives food to | those who fear him;*
he is ever mindful | of his covenant.

⁶ He has shown his people the power | of his works*
in giving them the lands | of the nations.

⁷ The works of his hands are faithful- | ness and justice;*
all his command- | ments are sure.

⁸ They stand fast forev- | er and ever,*
because they are done in | truth and equity.

⁹ He sent redemption to his people; he commanded his cove- | nant
forever;*
holy and awesome | is his name.

¹⁰ The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom; * those who act accordingly have a good understanding. His praise endures forever.

1 Corinthians 8:1-13

Now concerning ^[a] food offered to idols: we know that “all of us possess knowledge.” This “knowledge” puffs up, but love builds up. ²If anyone imagines that he knows something, he does not yet know as he ought to know. ³But if anyone loves God, he is known by God. ^[b]

⁴Therefore, as to the eating of food offered to idols, we know that “an idol has no real existence,” and that “there is no God but one.” ⁵For although there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth—as indeed there are many “gods” and many “lords”—⁶yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist.

⁷However, not all possess this knowledge. But some, through former association with idols, eat food as really offered to an idol, and their conscience, being weak, is defiled. ⁸Food will not commend us to God. We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do. ⁹But take care that this right of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak. ¹⁰For if anyone sees you who have knowledge eating ^[c] in an idol's temple, will he not be encouraged, ^[d] if his conscience is weak, to eat food offered to idols? ¹¹And so by your knowledge this weak person is destroyed, the brother for whom Christ died. ¹²Thus, sinning against your brothers ^[e] and wounding their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ. ¹³Therefore, if food makes my brother stumble, I will never eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble.

Mark 1:21-28

²¹And [Jesus, Andrew, Simon, James and John] went into Capernaum, and immediately on the Sabbath he entered the synagogue and was teaching. ²²And they were astonished at his teaching, for he taught them as one who had authority, and not as the scribes. ²³And immediately there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit. And he cried out, ²⁴“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.”²⁵ But Jesus rebuked him, saying, “Be silent, and come out of him!”²⁶ And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying out with a loud voice, came out of him.²⁷ And they were all amazed, so that they questioned among themselves, saying, “What is this? A new teaching with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him.”²⁸ And at once his fame spread everywhere throughout all the surrounding region of Galilee.

Message: The Blessing of Mediation

It's pretty common, I think, by this time – four weeks into the season – for many of us to have forgotten what the season of Epiphany is about. You and I can log into the internet and learn a great deal about people, often more than they would like us to know! But God is not like us, and there is nothing that we can know about him other than what he chooses to reveal to us.

God is so Other that we could not survive an encounter with him in a raw, unmediated form. It has always been understood that if God shows up unveiled, people die! The less mediated he is, the more frightening he is. Close encounters of the Divine Kind never ended well for those who experienced it. The people of Israel were so terrified by the sight and sound of God on Mount Horeb that they pleaded with Moses to make him go away lest they die! Death awaited those who touched the ark of the covenant. Not even Moses was permitted to see him in all his glory.

The book of Hebrews reminds us that in many and various way, God spoke to his people of old by the prophets; but now in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son. Our first lesson serves as a reminder to us, however, that care should be exercised before one presumes to speak for God! *But the prophet who presumes to speak a word in my name that I have not commanded him to speak, or¹⁰ who speaks in the name of other gods, that same prophet shall die.* Not the most encouraging or inviting word to hear while preparing a Sunday sermon!

The importance of understanding God coming to the church mediated through Word and Sacrament is described for us in Paul's letters to the Corinthians. This was a church that had convinced itself that God spoke them directly. Luther called such believers enthusiasts, and described them as having swallowed the Holy Spirit feathers and all! When no mediation of God is present, people can come up with questionable, even heretical

theology. The church at Corinth was so impressed with their own level of knowledge that they maintained that everything was lawful for them! Nothing was out of bounds! They maintained that it was their rights to do whatever they wanted: sleep with whoever they wanted, eat whatever they wanted!

In the passage we heard this morning, Paul reprimands them. He tells them that even if their "special knowledge" were correct, their application of it was wrong. "Special knowledge" puffs up and can leave a brother or sister for whom Christ died with a wounded conscience...or worse.

Mark presents us with God as mediated through Jesus, his incarnate Word. Luther's *Deus absconditus* – the hidden God – is revealed both by what he says and what he does.

Jesus shows up at the synagogue on the Sabbath, and immediately the people are confronted with something they've never encountered: power and authority. Unlike their scribes, Jesus proclaims the kingdom of God not by invoking some long list of rabbis and citing their opinions, but by simply telling the people directly to repent and believe the good news, that the kingdom of God has come near.

And immediately the people perceive that there is something more happening; they are not the only ones listening! There is another power in the room; Jesus' preaching flushes out a demon because evil is always revealed in the power of the gospel! Jesus' preaching is different because his word immediately begins to do what the Word does: it creates faith.

And we see immediately that faith and knowledge are not the same, even if that knowledge is "special". Even the demons believe that God is one, and they tremble at the thought! The demon clearly has knowledge – it knows exactly who Christ Jesus is – the Holy One of God. But there is a universe of difference between having *knowledge about* Jesus and having *faith in* him. One results in salvation, the other does not.

Jesus allows us to see the power of the devil in hindsight while he's driving it out of the man. If we start seeing too much too early, we're in trouble! In our own power and understanding we do not have the ability or the resources to combat evil on this level. Jesus will not expose us to this power except as we see it being defeated.

Our Psalm this morning touches on one of the primary characteristics of the God: Our Lord Jesus is gracious and full of compassion. Have you ever

noticed that Jesus never kills – not even a demon? He always just casts them out. There is always an opportunity for repentance, even for demons.

God always mediates himself, and while he did long ago at many times and in many ways speak to our ancestors in the faith by the prophets, now in these last days he speaks to us by his Son. Christ Jesus speaks and because he is the very Word of God in the flesh, that Word will not return to him without accomplishing that which God purposes. For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus.

Thanks be to God.