

Study Guide for January 28, 2018

Theme: God's power and authority in Christ Jesus

Readings: Deuteronomy 18:15-20; Psalm 111; 1 Corinthians 8:1-13; Mark 1:21-28

This week begins with the Fourth Sunday after Epiphany. I am hoping you've seen the theme that has emerged as God reaches out to awaken a sense of purpose and meaning in your own life. I invite you to take an honest look at your own narrative, and see if you can spot the way God has (or has not) been present. Who knows what epiphany God has in store for you.

Deuteronomy is a great book. But when not read completely can be misunderstood. Written around 1400 BC, it can be summed up as Moses' reminding the Israelites of their history and God's laws. Part of the Jewish Torah, it teaches us how to live and celebrate God with one another. Given the reading for this week, you can see why Christians often read Jesus in it. This is hard not to do because nearly every one of Jesus' teachings are taken from this book. Jesus admits, "I did not come to change the laws or the prophets but to uphold them." The way I see it, if Torah is the law of life, then Jesus is the living Torah, who gives us the way towards eternal life.

Psalm by definition is a sacred song or hymn that is often used in worship. I find it interesting that the lectionary locates this song of praise deep in the days of Ordinary Time. Perhaps it's to inspire us to "praise the Lord" in the midst of the hustle and bustle of life. Its theme is one of communal thanksgiving to God's great work in the world. Interesting to note: the psalm is an alphabetic acrostic. Each line begins with the next letter of the Hebrew alphabet. This literary framework suggests a comprehensive, A-to-Z celebration of God's power and authority. Unfortunately this gets lost in the English translation.

1 Corinthians is a letter written by the Apostle Paul around 55-57 AD. And was written to tackle the problems of sin that were rampant in the church at Corinth. This week's passage is a deliberation of the relationship between individual freedom and responsibility for a community's overall health, instigated by questions over eating meat that was part of idol worship. Since Paul puts love at top of the list for dealing with others in the church, it shouldn't surprise us that the question is not one's freedom to eat meat sacrificed to idols, but how one should freely act towards one spiritual family...which as both Jesus and Paul (and I) teach us...is through love.

Mark is considered the first of the four gospels. Written around 60 AD during the Roman persecution of Christians, this book is the briefest and most active of the four biographies of Jesus. In today's reading we get a sense of who Jesus is – a teacher who not only teaches with authority but who also has power over evil spirits. The epiphany I had while revisiting this passage is embarrassingly simple that I almost overlooked its importance in my own life: no one evil is more powerful than Christ, who through God's divine love is able to show compassion even to those demons who try to harm him.

READ: Deuteronomy 18: 15-20; Isaiah 42:1-9; 61:1-11

"The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me," says Moses to his people. But where are they now? Where are the Martin Luther King's? Where are the prophetic voices of our today? Who are the modern servants like Isaiah, Micah, or Jeremiah? Where are those who are challenge the establishment and call the people to faithfulness? Popular and prophetic are two different things.

Q: What is a prophet? How would you describe one to a friend using today's language?

Q: Who do you think in your life God has given power and authority to speak for Him?

READ: 1 Corinthians 8:1-13; 1 John 3:11-23

We all like to believe that we are smart, and often we like to let other people know it. But sin keeps us from knowing God, and being truly one with God. Thus we must be warned of being "puffed up" or arrogant, because Paul knows people who are more devoted to their own knowledge and wisdom tend to turn their devotion away from God (and towards themselves); thus they do not acquire true knowledge of God.

Q: If arrogance leads to sin, what leads you to God?

Q: What is the main theme that is present in both Paul and John's letters? And how do these speak specifically to a problem you might be having with someone?

READ: Mark 1:21-28; Matthew 28:18-20

Mark offers a visceral account of Jesus revealing his true power and authority. I invite you to read, slowly and carefully, this passage. And as you do, put yourself in the pew. You are one of the people in the synagogue watching with amazement as this great epiphany moment unfolds.

Q: What demons or evil spirits possess you? Which ones do you need Jesus to cast out?

Q: How has this text, or Jesus himself, amazed you?

Slow Read: Psalm 111. As you read and re-read this text, try to picture a place where you are gathered with people you love as this song unfolds. Who are they? What are you doing? How are you celebrating God's righteousness and faithfulness towards you?

Prayer: Giving God, you loved me before I knew how to love. You spoke to me long before I understood words. And you revealed your truth to me before I knew how to your glorify your holy name. Please keep loving, speaking, and revealing your true self to me so that I may never forget to glorify your holy name in all that I do. Amen.