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Epiphany 4

CHRIST'S SAVING MESSAGE IS ALWAYS A FRESH SURPRISE

She sat on the other side of my desk and burst into tears. This young mother of two blurted out, “Pastor Werre, your Bible information class has been turning my world upside down.” She had not been raised in childhood with any worldview or belief system. Her philosophy of life and her understanding of the parameters within which the world operates had been largely shaped by her time at UW Madison.

Another mom, a non-member parent who was applying to enroll her child in our school, sat down with me for a brief orientation of what we teach religiously. After presenting to her both the devastation of sin on our hearts and lives and also Christ's atoning sacrifice resulting in the free gift of eternal life in heaven, she remarked with glowing wide eyes, “It sounds almost too good to be true.

When's the last time you felt the powerful impact of Christ's message and it nearly bowled you over or electrified you with joy?

Sadly, the message from too many pulpits today has degenerated into a banal stream of platitudes reflecting the trending social sentiments. Everything is worded benignly so as not to offend anyone.

This is what preaching had slunk to in the Jewish synagogues of Jesus' day. Mostly, it was reduced to irrelevant musings of the minutiae of Jewish ceremonial law with no solid declarations of right or wrong, good or bad, truth or falsehood, sin or grace. Only one thing was for sure: you should try to follow the ceremonial law to be a good Jew. It would not be unlike a preacher today exhorting you to be a good citizen by helping to slow global warming.

Along came Jesus. He was a Jewish rabbi. As the custom was, He was invited to speak. Here's what Mark 1 says about Jesus' preaching: *They went to Capernaum, and when the Sabbath came, Jesus went into the synagogue and began to teach. The people were amazed at his teaching, because he taught them as one who had authority, not as their teachers of the law.*

The Greek verb here is powerful. The people were not merely amazed. They were blown away by Jesus' preaching. They'd never experienced anything like this before.

Let's try to imagine what Jesus preached. No doubt it would it would have been a continuation of what Jesus began to preach earlier in Galilee. Just prior to reaching Capernaum, Mark 1 says Jesus began to preach, *The time has come! The Kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!* Christ's purpose and interest was the salvation of souls. No doubt He spoke of sin and grace, guilt and forgiveness, accountability to God and reconciliation with God. In all of it, Jesus would have pointed to Himself as the key, the great Reconciler. Nothing Jesus said would have been up for debate or left for speculation. Everything He said would have been clear, factual and packed a punch. Jesus' message is always as old as Genesis 3 and as new as the next time He opens His mouth.

All the sudden, Jesus is publicly confronted by a demon-possessed man. Mark 1 doesn't tell us everything we'd like to know. Had the synagogue become such a home of untruth that the demon was comfortable there and was only disturbed when Truth

Himself walked through the door? If that were the case, then the demon's reaction to Jesus' preaching would not have been entirely unlike the reaction of the people there, would it?

We can make some observations about the demon's response. For one, he makes no sense. On the one hand the demon seems to be derogatory toward Jesus, Jesus from the dirty, backward hamlet of Nazareth. On the other hand the demon seems tortured to acknowledge the Holy One of God. But either way, it doesn't benefit him one bit to say it. Listen again to Mark 1, *Just then a man in their synagogue who was possessed by an evil spirit cried out, "What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are -the Holy one of God!"* A person could logically ask, "If you know, Mr. Demon, that Jesus has come to destroy you, then what are you doing there? Why wouldn't you get out of Dodge? Why are you behaving like a moth to the flame?" It should be no surprise to us that the devil is not logical. Jesus said he is a liar and the father of lies. He deludes no one more than himself.

We can also note the demon does nothing constructive, nothing helpful, nothing good for those around him. He

is only self-interested, bent on destruction, creates only noise and confusion. Listen again to Mark 1: “*Be quiet!*” said Jesus sternly. “*Come out of him!*” The evil spirit shook the man violently and came out of him with a shriek. Jesus has absolutely no patience with the demon. Slams him into oblivion with the iron-fisted punch of His powerful Word. Notice, by contrast, when Jesus raises His voice, it is not merely to make noise or create confusion, it is for the salvation of this man. In fact, when Jesus cried out in a loud voice from the cross, it was not for Himself, but for our salvation.

But the people in the synagogue didn’t pick up on any of this. In fact, their reaction is disappointing. Mark 1 says, *The people were all so amazed that they asked each other, “What is this? A new teaching -and with authority! He even gives orders to evil spirits and they obey him.”* Understandably, this incident would have made an impression on anyone. But that’s as far as it goes in their minds. There seems to be no understanding of, not even any curiosity to grasp, what Jesus’ message was all about or what it would mean for them.

Which brings us back to the original question: Does the impact of Christ's message still bowl you over or electrify you with joy?

Are you like the elderly woman who understood that she was near death, a woman who had attended church every Sunday, Sunday after Sunday, her whole life, but expressed to the pastor, "I don't know... will I get to go to heaven after I die?"

Are you like the lifelong Lutheran who was asked, "What's the difference between the Lutherans and the Catholics?" and he didn't know how to answer?

Does the sound and style of the music in church make a bigger impact on you than the message it communicates? Are you someone who says, "I get more out of the children's sermon than out of the regular sermon?" Do you find you can't focus on the message in church for more than a minute or two but you have no trouble giving your undivided attention to a Super Bowl for four hours straight? And if we take a deeper honest look, it's not that we can't focus, but we just don't have the will to.

To think that Almighty God could have remained forever silent, shrouded in mystery but instead broke into our world, reached out to us and revealed the most amazing truth to save us, a message with such power and clarity that if the world gets even whiff of it, just one doctrine or another, the world goes ballistic... and yet why do we so easily buy into satan's premise that it's all noise and confusion and so easily give up on understanding it or retaining it because it's not worth the trouble?

Why? Because we are from the bottom of our hearts and in the deepest crevasses of our minds entirely sinful. Lost and condemned creatures.

And though in our sinfulness we can never seem to get it right, we can't even do the simplest thing: just listen - the wonder of it is that our Savior Jesus continues on His work of proclaiming His message undaunted, undeterred, and with enthusiasm undiminished. He is eager for our salvation. This Son of God volunteered to enter our world to take the guilt and the punishment for our sin on Himself as He suffered and died on the cross. He broke out of the tomb full of life to demonstrate that death and God's judgment has been removed from all who trust in Him. Now He earnestly endeavors to tell

us the good news. He doesn't give up communicating to us this reality so that we might hear it and believe it and have a part in it -so that we too may know and enjoy rescue from guilt, from death and from hell.

He even provides what we need so that we can believe it... the Holy Spirit.

Dear Friends, no more powerful words in heaven and on earth can be spoken than when the pastor, as Christ's representative, stands before you and announces that all your sins are forgiven. As you listen and believe that declaration, the Judge who will destroy this world with fire is reconciled to you and becomes your most loyal, loving Father so that you are no longer living under a cloud of His disapproval, but can thrive under the ever-preserving umbrella of His grace.

When the pastor, as Christ's representative speaks the words, "I baptize you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit," and you take those words to heart, heaven is opened to you and you are from then on continuously going about here on earth with the wide open door of heaven present wherever you are.

When the pastor as Christ's representative declares, "Take and eat. This is my body. This is my blood. Given to you for the forgiveness of sins. As those words register on your mind and you believe them, you are receiving divine health even to eternal life.

The young mother in my office moved away from Sun Prairie. Happily, she continued her Christian instruction until one day she was ready to profess her faith in Jesus Christ publicly in the presence of a Christian congregation -one of our WELS congregations in northern Wisconsin.

Every time Christ's words are spoken or repeated to you they are new and fresh and filled with as much reality and as much power as if God were declaring them for the very first time.

Isn't it amazing? Isn't it surprising? Doesn't it completely reset your day, your outlook, yes, even your life? Could a believer ever tire of hearing it? Could a believer not want to keep learning more?