

**Epiphany 4B
Mark 1:21-28
February 1, 2009**

It was the very beginning of Jesus' ministry. He had been inaugurated, as it were, by the Holy Spirit at his baptism in the Jordan River. He had spent time in the wilderness pondering the shape of the work ahead. He had emerged in Galilee with a message of hope and change, and had set about assembling his team ... Peter and Andrew, James and John.

And then, as his very first public action, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath, to worship with his community. And he was allowed to speak, and it was amazing. He spoke calmly, with incredibly clarity and purpose. He didn't dissemble, or quote other experts to support his views. He said what needed saying. He said it with authority.

And the people were amazed. This was not business as usual. This was something new, something different. Change was in the air. They couldn't stop talking about it.

But suddenly, from the back of the room came a wail. The first cry of dissent and opposition. "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."

Jesus hadn't even really gotten started yet, and already voices began crying out against him. Here he was, a good Jewish man, clearly steeped in the Scriptures, speaking about God, about God's intentions for the world, about coming deliverance, about a new way to live. He was talking about God, but already he was making all the official God people nervous.

Right there in that synagogue, they all began to sense that things were going to be different. And different is scary. And that fear of change, of newness, of challenge, found its voice in one disturbed man shouting in the assembly.

“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.”

This is an amazing twist, right here at the beginning of Mark’s gospel. Up until now, the only voice that has identified Jesus as God’s Messiah is the voice from heaven itself, tearing the sky apart to say, “You are my Son, the Beloved. With you I am well pleased.”

The voice of affirmation has spoken. Now the voice of opposition has its say. Both voices understand completely who Jesus is and what he has come to do. And the voice of the one who created him and commissioned him for this work, the voice of God, is well pleased.

But others see it differently. To them it’s like that glass of water in the movie *Jurassic Park*. As the Tyrannosaurus rex approaches, the surface of the water begins to tremble with each advancing step. For those who have carefully ordered their world ... their religious world, their public world, their financial world, even the world of their families ... for them, there is no pleasure. They understand who Jesus is. They see what he has come to do. And they are far from pleased.

They haven’t all realized it yet, not in this very first chapter of Mark’s gospel. It will take some of them years to realize the threat posed by this simple preacher from Galilee. And then their solution to the problem will be simple ... nail him to a cross and silence him for good. In the meantime, here at the beginning of his work, that anxiety is only beginning to emerge. The fear is only beginning to stir.

But as so often happens, it is the marginal people, the mentally ill, the outcasts, who pick up on the anxiety of a group before anyone else. Their defenses are much weaker, the tension seems more acute. And so this man, this disturbed man, cries out – naming the fears that have begun to emerge in that synagogue:

“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.”

This man names the still-borning terrors that arise when God's Anointed One enters the scene. And I believe he names those terrors in a way that all of us can understand, and can name for ourselves, if we are honest.

Because just as he did 2,000 years ago, Jesus comes walking into our lives, into our world, and into our religious gatherings. He comes speaking with authority, with the voice of God, without deferring to our carefully ordered rules and traditions and customs. And when we see him, when we really see him, we know what's going to happen. He's going to shake the whole thing up and turn it on its head.

And I believe those three statements the man cried out in the synagogue that day are the same three approaches we also revert to, when Jesus comes into our lives and sits down to make his case.

“What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth?” Let's be honest. Do we really want Jesus to pay close attention to us -- *really*? Do we want him eavesdropping on our family quarrels? Do we want him watching over our shoulder as we flick the remote or surf the web? Do we want him looking into our hearts right now, this morning, looking at our boredom, our distraction, our mundane little daydreams – how thoughtless is our worship. How often we just go through the motions.

And if he sat down next to you right now, took your hands in his, looked right into your eyes, I think any of us would shrink back in fear. We would cry out, “What do you have to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Don't you have something better to do than to bother with our petty little lives?”

The next statement follows relentlessly upon the first. “Have you come to destroy us?” Because our lives as we have constructed them cannot withstand the scrutiny of Jesus' gaze. Start with this instant. Do you honestly think Jesus cares if we sing out of the 1982 Hymnal or Wonder Love and Praise or LEVAS, or if we sing some peppy praise song instead? Do you think Jesus cares what we sing or what we say or what prayers we use? He cares, oh yes – not about *what* we do here today, but *how* we do it.

Do we do it with gladness and singleness of heart? Do we do it with a desire to draw close to God? Do we do it with a desire to belong to Jesus, and Jesus alone? No, we don't. We never do ... not with complete and total devotion.

We don't worship like that, and we don't live like that. Our hour here this morning and the other 23 hours contained in this day reveal how infrequently we really seek God, how attenuated is our faith. And when the anemic little gospel we proclaim becomes visible under Jesus' thoughtful gaze, well, of course we panic. "Have you come to destroy us?" we ask. Because we can't see how we can stand before him, foolish and weak as we are.

And then at last we acknowledge him for who he is. The one with the authority. The one who embodies holiness in every pore of his body. The one who will let that beauty and love and sacred self get nailed up to a cross for our sakes. The one who refuses to destroy us, allowing himself to be destroyed instead.

The one who has the power to cross that great chasm that lies between us and God, the power to forgive us our smallness, our weakness, our pettiness, our brokenness. The one who has the power to heal us and make us whole.

And in the face of that, what can we do but stammer, "I know who you are, the Holy One of God."

Jesus, as fresh as the day he walked into Capernaum, has entered our sacred space this morning. We will meet him here at his table, take his broken Body into our hands, drink the very life that poured out of him. He knows that we have recognized him for who he is. And he does not need to hear any of our usual prevarications.

He does not need to hear, "what have you to do with me, Jesus?" He has everything to do with us. He knows it, and in our best moments, we know it too.

He does not need to hear, “have you come to destroy us?” He has not come to destroy, but to transform. And we have a choice. We can see that transformation as the threat of destruction. Or we can lean into it, let that change happen and have our lives handed back to us like a precious gift.

He does in fact need to hear that last statement. “I know who you are, the Holy One of God.” Not because he does not know who he is, but because we need to acknowledge that WE know who he is. He is the Holy One. He is our Lord. He came to claim us in our baptism and we said, “yes, you will be my Savior.” He feeds us, week by week with his very self, and we take that bread and drink that cup and allow him to draw us into his life and into his work.

And so, confronted with the Holy One of God, how are we to live? In terror or in joy? In fear or in faith? We could cling to our old ways and our old brokenness. We do it every day. Or we could let today be different. We could let go – with a great and haunting cry -- and let him have it all, our selves, our souls, our bodies.