Sermon on Revelation

Epiphany 5B February 4, 2024

Mark 1:29-39

The Season of Epiphany is a season of revelation and manifestation.  All of our gospel readings during this season are geared to revealing who Jesus is and making that known.

Today the revelation of who Jesus is is found in one particular spot.  You could say that Jesus is revealed in the healing of Simon’s mother-in-law and those of the whole city who were brought to him.  But those healings don’t necessarily reveal Jesus to be the Son of God.  Among other things, faith healers were common in that day and age, as well as the fact that both Peter and Paul healed people, and they weren’t/aren’t the Son of God.

The revelation of who Jesus is actually comes from the demons:  “he would not permit the demons to speak, because they knew him.”  Jesus is revealed as the Son of God not to those around him or those whom he heals, but to the readers of Mark’s gospel.  The question becomes, why do the readers get to know who Jesus is through demons, but not those around him?  There are a few answers.

The first is that we readers already know the story (or stories, if you include the other gospels).  Sticking with Mark, we already know about the baptism and voice from heaven.  We already know about his many healings.  We already know about the calming of the sea.  We already know about the Resurrection.  We know all that stuff, so it’s no surprise to read that demons know who he is.

For the people of his day, however, it was not yet time.  As Jesus says over in the Gospel of John, “My hour has not yet come.”  Jesus has a mission to get to, as evidenced by telling his disciples he needed to go to the neighboring town.  He could not afford to have demons jumping the gun and announcing who he was.

Another reason he didn’t allow the demons to speak was because, even though they knew who he was, they are still demons, and you really can’t trust demons.  In the original “Bedazzled” movie, Dudley Moore’s character is in love with a co-worker, although she doesn’t know that.  In his attempt to at least get a date, he makes a pact with the devil, who grants him seven wishes.

In one of those wishes, Dudley asks that he and the woman of his dreams be together in the country, away from all distractions, with no other men around, so there would be no competition, surrounded by children, because he wanted a big family with her.  The devil grants his wish by making them both nuns in a rural convent that takes in orphans.

Or think about Eve and the serpent.  The serpent begins by asking a false question:  “Did God say, ‘You shall not eat from any tree in the garden’?”  He eventually convinces her she won’t die, her eyes will be opened, and she will be like God, knowing good from evil.  Theologian Walter Brueggemann posits that the conversation between Eve and the serpent is about moving the goalposts.  That is, God presents a GIVEN (don’t eat from the tree), which is turned into an OPTION (it’s really not all that bad).  This was a way to get around what is clearly stated.  In today’s terms, we might call it rationalizing bad behavior.

In both these examples, the antagonist uses what is desired or known as the starting point, but quickly finds ways to undermine the original intent.  As one ancient Church father said:  The demons make use of the truth as a kind of bait.  And as both Augustine and Athanasius pointed out, confessing Jesus as Son of God and the Holy One of God is meaningless if not done in love.  So allowing the demons to speak would have opened up a whole new can of worms which Jesus wasn’t quite ready to deal with.

This is important for us as we work to reveal Christ in this Season of Epiphany and as we work to make 2024 an Epiphany year.

It’s important because we must always remember that love is the foundation of everything God-related.  Love God.  Love your neighbor.  How we treat the disenfranchised, the alien, the hungry, homeless, and sick should all be based in love.  As John says, “Those who say, ‘I love God’ and hate others are liars.”  And that list goes on.

Just because you know who Jesus is does not mean that you love and follow him.  This certainly applies to the demons, but it also applies to others as well.  One big “for instance” comes from those who passionately quote scenes from Revelation that depict Jesus coming as a military conqueror striking down nations and stamping out those who oppose him with fury and wrath.  They delight not only in portraying Jesus as their conquering hero, but they delight in watching the bloody destruction of their enemies.  This is not only a selected misreading of Revelation, it also totally ignores and marginalizes God’s message of love.

Viewing Jesus this way allows one to ignore his mandate to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and welcome the stranger and alien.  It allows one to ignore his example of not judging others for who they are.  It allows one to ignore his mandate to love, not condemn.  It allows one to make an idol founded upon your own biases and hatreds rather than following and acting upon the actual teachings and examples of Jesus.

The demons know who Jesus was, but they weren’t/aren’t interested in proclaiming and following his loving example.  The demons were/are only interested in proclaiming a Jesus whom they can control and use to manipulate others.

Plenty of people know who Jesus is.  Plenty of people also try to use Jesus to gain power, to control people, to rule over people, and to punish people.  Those, quite frankly, are demonic actions that have no basis in the knowledge and love of God.  Additionally, those demonic words and actions should be silenced as the demons themselves were silenced.

We are in the Season of Epiphany.  We are in the season of revelation and manifestation.  May we work to reveal Christ to the world in a way that doesn’t batter people with a vengeful and vindictive lord, but shelters them from storms of all kinds.  And then, here in this safe and loving space, may they learn the truth of Christ, gaining the strength to go and do likewise.

Amen.