

FOURTH SUNDAY AFTER THE EPIPHANY

Deuteronomy 18:15-20; Mark 1:21-28

The Prophet who teaches with authority.

Anytime a group of people lives together, no matter what their age, whether in a family, on a playground, at an office, or in a society, it is only a matter of time before there are debates about who's in charge. Parents and children clash over authority. "You're not the boss of me," the toddler yells. "Oh yes I am," Mom retorts. "Who are you to tell me what to do," the teenager quips when he thinks he has some dirt on dad. "I am your father, and that is all that matters, so do as I say and not as I do." Dad insists. Sometimes the power struggle continues long after a child grows up, moves out, and gets married. Husband and wife clash over authority. The metaphorical pants are tugged and tussled over and traded until there aren't really any metaphorical pants left to cover the sorry and shameful state of the relationship. "I am the head of the household," the husband adamantly explains. "Too bad the head doesn't have a brain," the wife spouts back. The littlest issue becomes a marital Gettysburg, all in a battle over authority. And the home is just a microcosm of larger struggles for authority in the school, the office, the capital, and elsewhere.

We are born with a desire for authority, as you quickly learn once you have your second child. I'll never forget a while back when Nicholas was in a phase of pretending to be a dog. It was cute; but then I started to notice a trend. Maggie started to enjoy Nicholas' new canine identity too much. First, she would clip a leash on her little brother's neck and walk him around. Then she would have him do some dog tricks. Then one day when I went to leave Nicholas was on the other side of the dog gate, lying like a dog on the dirty dog rug, loving it because he was an obedient dog, listening to his master, doing what he was told. And while we'd like to feel sorry for Nicholas, let's wait to see how long it takes him to put Isaiah on a leash before we do so. I am sure that those of you who have brothers or sisters have plenty of similar stories of your own.

The desire for authority can be a dangerous thing, especially when we get authority and it goes to our head. But an unthinking or reckless submission to illegitimate authority can also be a dangerous thing. Think of all the war crimes perpetrated by those who were just "following orders." Think of all the playground drama that occurs because kids were just "following the leader." Call to mind all the horrible things members of cults have subjected themselves to by "obeying the leader." Yes, sometimes in retrospect we look back at some of the leaders that people have followed and marvel that anyone ever would have given them authority, but the fact remains that, as much as we all want authority, we all also desperately want someone to lead us.

I read this a few weeks ago:

First one sheep jumped to its death. Then stunned Turkish shepherds, who had left the herd to graze while they had breakfast, watched as nearly 1,500 others followed, each leaping off the same cliff, Turkish media reported.

In the end, 450 dead animals lay on top of one another in a billowy white pile, the Aksam newspaper said.

Those who jumped later were saved as the pile got higher and the fall more cushioned, Aksam reported.

It is no coincidence that God calls us sheep. Sheep are loyal creatures that learn their shepherds voice and follow it at all cost. Yet, because they are so ready to follow a voice of authority, sheep can also be led to their own disaster if they learn to heed the voice of a wicked shepherd, or simply to follow because others are following. Authority can be a dangerous thing, both when we try to usurp it, and when we grant it to someone carelessly.

St. Mark's Gospel is the Gospel of miracles. St. Mark records miracle after miracle to demonstrate the power behind Jesus' claims and promises. St. Mark recognized that Jesus' miracles showed His authority and that His authority was not something that He was granted by the masses, but something that He demonstrated to the masses by His miracles. Jesus authority came from His position as the Messiah, the Son of God, and God Himself. Yet Jesus did not merely appeal to His position to assert His authority. Jesus' demonstrated His authority by exercising it faithfully.

Parents clearly have God-given authority over their children, but it will do parents little good simply to appeal to their position as parents to assert their authority. Parents will do best to demonstrate that authority by exercising it faithfully, by faithfully discharging their role as parent for the benefit of the ones over whom God has given them authority: their children. Authority is most respected when it is recognized, not when it is demanded. So also, the husband is in God's order of things the head of the household, but the head does not evict its brain if the husband's authority goes to his head and he starts to demand authority rather than faithfully exercising it by discharging his role as husband for the benefit of the one for whose benefit he's been given authority: the wife. The same is true of pastor and parishioner. The pastor is a called servant, placed in authority by his call, but exercising that authority by his service for the good of his people.

Notice that Jesus never asserts who He is in our text. He simply teaches, and, when He teaches, the people are amazed, for He teaches as one with authority, not presenting an academic review of Old Testament theology like the scribes and experts of the law, not quoting other authorities, but teaching the people where they are at and in a way they can understand, teaching as One sent to teach. He jumped into their world and spoke in clear, common, colloquial, earthy terms to express heavenly truths. And before He even does a miracle, the people marvel at His teaching. Only after teaching does He demonstrate the power behind His words by casting out a demon. And only then does the matter of who Jesus is come up, revealed by a demon of all people. St. Mark writes, *"And immediately there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit. And he cried out, '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.'"*

And the demon was exactly right. Jesus was the Holy One of God, the Anointed Prophet sent to instruct and save God's children. Jesus was and is the Prophet foretold in Deuteronomy today. *"I 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."* He was the Prophet from their midst, from among their brothers, who would succeed and supersede Moses. He was the Savior about whom God simply insisted (not requested): *"to Him you shall listen."* Not *you should listen to Him*, but *"to Him you shall listen."*

In the Holy Gospel today we see, not a prophet, but the Prophet who speaks with God's authority, because He speaks as God. We see His authority recognized, not because He appealed to it, but because He faithfully exercised it for the benefit of His hearers and demonstrated it by overcoming the devil and His minions. We will soon see the greatest and most faithful exercising and demonstration of His authority for our benefit in Lent, the season that follows Epiphany, as He gives His life for us to save us from sin and show us what authority is: not something to be lusted for or carelessly granted, but a gift from God given to various people in their various roles to be used for the benefit of others.

Hear your Prophet and Shepherd's voice today, learn it well, judge all others who claim spiritual authority by it, follow it no matter what the cost, and recognize the authority behind it from the loving care He shows for you. Recognize your Savior's authority and acknowledge the power behind His message by marveling at the miracle it works: you believe His teaching. Those who heard our Prophet teach with authority today marveled and were amazed, but we are not told they believed. But St. Mark did not record this for us to simply to marvel and be amazed; he recorded it to strengthen our faith in the words and work of our Prophet, our Rabbi, our Savior. Take comfort that the One who saves and guides your life is the One who casts out demons, the One who teaches with authority, the One who is the Authority behind all truth, the Prophet to whom authority rightly belongs and by whom authority is rightly exercised. And, after you've been astounded a while, imitate Him as you exercise the authority God has given you in your various roles, using what you have been given for the benefit of those for whom you've been given it. Amen.