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Fourth Sunday after Epiphany B, January 28, 2018

The season of Epiphany is often called the season of light, because Jesus is the light in the darkness that illuminates God's great plan for Creation, the plan that existed from the beginning of time - to make known to us the great mystery that all things come from God, all things exemplify God, and all things return to God. In God we live and move and have our being, as Paul loved to point out. One of the phrases that Jesus used for this mystery was the Kingdom of Heaven within. Through Jesus God made known to us that this Kingdom we long for, the fullness of life promised in the law and the prophets is already present. And, this Kingdom of God come near is shown by Jesus not as great power, not immense wealth, not supreme majesty - but deep vulnerability, detachment from the things of the world, and joyful humility. Jesus embodied this full reality of God's love, and called us into full participation in it. He demonstrated through his life and teachings that this mystical union is best understood and participated in, not when we are at our best, but when we are at our worst. Not when we are holding on, but when we are letting go. Not when we are seeking the things of the world, but when we are seeking God. It's this message of an upside down world where the last shall be first and the first last, where enemies are forgiven, and strangers welcomed that so astounded and amazed people... and threatened others.

In today's Gospel we're not told what Jesus read from the Torah. But, in Luke, we're told that when he spoke in Nazareth, the specific passage he read was from Isaiah 61:1

"The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor," (and incidentally he deliberately left out the next line having to do with vengeance.)

It wasn't just the words that were so important - bringing good news, binding up, releasing, proclaiming liberty - it was that Jesus was identifying himself as the anointed - sent to announce God's restorative justice. And, the amazed people believed Jesus because he spoke with authority.

So, it's no wonder that an unclean spirit would be upset. "What have you to do with us, Jesus? Have you come to destroy us?"

Jesus was dangerous. He was challenging the status quo - where power, wealth, and privilege were things to be grasped at, held onto, and defended. He was awakening the people's hearts and minds to the truth that their true wealth, allegiance, and power was not in the things of the world, but in the love of God.

But, if you're part of a system that depends on the subjugation of the weak, if you have a vested interest in people being captive - exploiting, excluding - binding the brokenhearted and releasing captives and proclaiming liberty, wouldn't be such good news, would it? And, the Galilee of Jesus' time was beneath a very heavy yoke of oppression, exploitation, and subjugation. The Roman Empire was part of it. The ruling Herodeon family, collaborating with the Romans were part of it. The Pharisees and scribes with their obsession with the law were part of it. The zealots who were trying to foment rebellions had a part in it, too, because they just wanted to replace one unjust ruling class with another. Each group had a vested interest in ignoring Jesus' teaching or even rejecting it. And, none of these powers had any interest in the Kingdom Jesus came to proclaim.

And, sadly two thousand years later we also have a vested interest in ignoring Jesus as well.

Jesus came to proclaim the great reality of our oneness in God and opposed any forces that stood in the way of that reality - any forces that would separate rather than unify, whether the forces of corporate power, wealth, and privilege, or the so called forces of freedom that insisted that their vision for peace and justice was the right one and everyone else was wrong, or the individual forces of fear, hatred, and resentment that we each carry in our hearts and grapple with daily. In our day, each of these forces might make compelling arguments for our attention and allegiance, but, they are no match for the power of Christ, once it has

been brought to bear. And, that is why the powers of darkness are so threatened by Jesus.

“What have you to do with us Jesus of Nazareth?” Great question. What have you to do with us? These words, or other words much like them, are the response of evil and sin to the Light of Christ. “What does this have to do with me anyway?” Darkness tries to convince us that there are areas of the world where God’s unifying love does not apply. “All that love stuff is all well and good for church, but it doesn’t have anything to do with the real world.” But these are the arguments of darkness. Unclean spirits do anything they can protect themselves from the light. But, the light has a way of creeping into dark places, doesn’t it. As we begin to let go of our allegiance to this world, and allow the Spirit to work and God’s Kingdom to grow in our hearts, light starts to shine, and illumine our lives in surprising ways, often in places we’d rather it not shine...our treasured possessions and obsessions, our prized fears and resentments, the things in the world around us we were trying to ignore - poverty, injustice, discrimination, hatred. We may have grown pretty good at keeping the light out of some of the parts of our life - to say, what does this have to do with me anyway? But the more we feel God’s love and mercy in our lives, the more we feel the connectedness of all things in Christ, and the less we’re able to compartmentalize, letting the darkness be something, “out there,” the less we are able to say, “What have you to do with us, Jesus?” And as the light starts to shine, we begin to see incredible things start to happen, just like the people in Capernaum who were amazed at Jesus’ power and authority. Our lives become freer, healthier, more joyful. The world is brighter. We want to act more generously, more forgivingly. It is the Kingdom of God.

That heavenly reign, comes with only one catch, though. We have to accept it. It’s an extravagant gift freely given, which must be freely received. And, that is our life’s work - receiving the Kingdom. And, in this heavenly kingdom, there’s only one Lord and King - the all vulnerable, all humble, all loving Jesus Christ. And, therein lies the rub. This week Richard Rohr discussed this tension in one of his meditations, and I’m paraphrasing, here -
If Jesus is Lord, then Caesar is not!

If Jesus is Lord, then the economy and stock market are not!

If Jesus is Lord, then my nice house, my prized possessions, my beloved country, and my important job are not!

If Jesus is Lord, then my political agenda - my liberalism or conservatism, my causes, and my principles - they are not!

If Jesus is Lord, then my worries, resentments, fears, and prejudices are not!

If Jesus is Lord, then I am not!

The price for real transformation is high - we have to be willing to change our loyalties from power, success, money, ego, and control to the imitation of a vulnerable God, where servanthood, surrender, and simplicity reign.

We all participate in the systems of this world, the systems that perpetuate, not God's Kingdom, but the Kingdom of Darkness, not the unity of God's love, but the separateness of evil and death. We can't help it, it's the world we live in. But, when we choose to follow Jesus, we can no longer turn a blind eye to the evil in the world. When the great mystery is revealed in our hearts, then we begin to turn away from the things that have held us captive. We don't do it perfectly. And, in fact, it isn't expected of us.

What is expected, is that when we notice the darkness creep in, we ask for God's light and resist. When we find ourselves saying, "what have you to do with me Jesus," we remember our baptismal vows to repent and return to the Lord.

There are no places in God's world where God's extravagant love does not reach. Either we all belong to God, or none of us does. Either the Kingdom of God is at hand or it does not exist. As it says in our collect today, God's love governs all things both in heaven and on earth. So the belief that there are things where our baptismal vows do not apply, is just an illusion.

Today I invite you to consider those places where you have thought the light of Christ does not need to shine, or where you've never considered that the power and authority of Jesus could be brought to bear - Maybe it's something you made up your mind about long ago, "this is just the way it is, and always will be!" Perhaps it's in keeping the violence and injustice in the world at arms length, something for others to worry

about. Perhaps it's in lumping people together so their individual lives don't have to matter to you - those drug addicts, those unfortunate migrants, those evil Muslims, those pitiful homeless. Perhaps it's a personal behavior that you've long ago accepted, saying, "Well, that's just the way I am." Consider with me those places where you've been saying, "what has Jesus do with this?" As you reflect, ask yourself, Is there just the slightest spark of light waiting to be kindled there? Are you ready to allow Jesus to enter that space with you? If upon reflection, you find something...some unclean spirit that is saying, "what has Jesus to do with this" maybe you'd like to share it with someone you trust. Maybe you'd like to share it with me or another of the clergy, so we might pray with you, and bring the power of Christ to bear, that you might allow the light of God's heavenly Kingdom to burn ever brighter in your life.