

# Sermon for Sunday, January 28, 2018 - "Authority to Set Free"

Fourth Sunday after Epiphany  
January 28, 2018  
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church  
Decorah, Iowa  
Rev. Amy Zalk Larson

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Beloved of God, grace to you and peace in the name of Jesus.

This is a strange story that feels so removed from our world now. An unclean spirit cries out in the middle of a sermon, nonetheless! I hope that's something we never experience here!

We don't really know what to make of talk of demons and unclean spirits, but that's not the only part of this story that can leave us squirming. There's the whole notion of Jesus' authority. The people in the synagogue that day were startled by Jesus' authority, and we often don't know what to make of it either. Jesus' power may be good news for someone who's possessed by an unclean spirit, but what does it mean for us?

We're generally pretty distrustful of authority, pretty reluctant to think that anyone else should have much power over our lives. We like to think of ourselves as free, rational and in control.

Except, in reality, there are no end of things, people and forces that have authority in our lives. For instance: I bet most adults here started the day with a psychoactive drug. I always do. I take mine straight, but sometimes I'll stir in some cream or sugar. We've only been drinking coffee for the last few hundred years, but our dependence on it wields considerable authority over us. If you've ever tried to give up sugar, quit smoking or stop drinking, you know first-hand that our appetites have some pretty major authority in our lives.

We may have nothing to fear but fear itself. Yet, fear of violence, fear of change, fear of being different, fear of disease, fear of missing out, fear of loss, fear of so many things, drive us. Politicians and marketers capitalize on that fear to control us much more than we care to admit. When people promise to keep us safe, we often end up obeying their authority without even batting an eye, usually without even being aware it's happening.

The consumeristic mentality in our world today also has tremendous power over us. We justify all manner of unhelpful actions by telling ourselves that we deserve to feel good or that we just weren't getting our needs met.

I could argue that these things, and all the other things that control us, are demonic - that we, just like that man in the synagogue, need to have the demons cast out.

Except I'm not sure we're that guy. I'm not sure that's what we most need. I think we're more like those people in the synagogue who are startled to realize that there's somebody new, somebody with authority, who has shown up. I think we're just as surprised as they were to hear that Jesus is THE authority for us, and as slow to believe it.

Some of us have experienced the sudden exit of an evil and destructive presence from our lives, and thanks be to God for that kind of power displayed. Most of us have a long, slow slog through life - seeing and hearing the good news of Jesus and then stepping back, scratching our heads, unsure what to make of it all, what it means for us.

I don't think it means we need to decide to give Jesus more authority over our lives. We wish we could be in control like that - that we could look at Jesus and his ways of humility, service and love and just choose to act like that. But that's not how it works. If we can't make a decision about managing our appetites, if we can be controlled by politicians and slick ad campaigns, if our selfish desires wield too much authority in our lives, then, as much as we hate to admit it, our own decisions and willpower don't mean much.

What matters, rather, is that God has made a decision about us, about you. You are loved. You are forgiven, and set free, and made new because God has made a decision about you; and that's the authoritative word of the sovereign God. What we need more than a flashy exorcism is to hear God loves us and sets us free and to hear that often enough that we believe it.

God's decision to love and free us means that things don't have to stay the way they are. If there's something that needs changing, change becomes possible. It's possible because it doesn't depend on us.

It depends upon Jesus who has authority over all the powers that defy God - all the other forces that drive us away from God's intent that we be well. It depends upon Jesus whose life-giving authority sets us free. When we're set free, then change happens. When we're set free, we can be part of bringing meaningful change to our world.

It doesn't depend on us. We need to show up and pay attention, of course; we need to put ourselves in places where we'll hear God's freeing word. But, we can do this knowing that it's not all up to us, that somebody with real authority - Jesus - has come into the world and into our lives.

Jesus is probably not going to boot out whatever needs booting from our lives the way he booted the demon out of that guy in the synagogue. Magical thinking like that is bound to leave us frustrated and confused.

But it does mean that the authoritative word from God regarding you is love. Jesus has come, Jesus is for you. Jesus has authority over all the forces that can lead you away from God's intents for you. Those forces do not have ultimate authority.

Let's take a moment for prayer to reflect on God's authoritative word of love for each of us.