

Sermon for Sunday, January 31, 2021 - "The Author of All, the Liberating Authority"

Fourth Sunday After Epiphany
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Decorah, Iowa
Rev. Amy Zalk Larson

[Click here to read scripture passages for the day.](#)

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

Those in the synagogue were astounded and amazed at Jesus, for he taught as one having authority. Lately I've been thinking a lot about authority, pondering which authorities, and even which authors, I can trust.

I ask this about the news I consume. Is this writer offering information or opinion? What's the ideological bent here? Am I getting diverse perspectives? What sources provide the most reliable, authoritative news? This question about authors also relates to our Good Shepherd Antiracism Task Force work. The Task Force has committed to learning together, but who are trustworthy guides for us?

And as crazy as it sounds, I've even been wondering which authors to trust about how best to breathe. I kid you not! This week I was part of a Zoom pastors' meeting and the presenter said that most of us breathe in ways that aren't helpful. We breathe through our mouth and don't use the built-in air filter God gave us in our nose. We breathe in rapid shallow ways that can increase anxiety and impact our sleep.

This presenter went on to give us advice about breathing, but it was different from the way my yoga teachers encourage me to breathe, and that's different from what's suggested by authors of contemplative prayer, and different still from other articles on health and well-being I've read lately. Of course, these varied approaches to breathing all have good and varied goals, but which one is best for me now? The presentation on breathing was supposed to reduce stress, but it didn't really do that for me this week. So many perspectives and now I can't even breathe right.

In this internet age we have access to so many authors, so many authorities, so much information. We can learn and be guided by people all around the world. Our perspectives and worldviews can be shaped in such varied ways. That is a blessing and a curse. Leaders, teachers and organizations that used to take their authority for granted must now earn trust. We're held to account for how we use power. Many people are taking a good long look at the pitfalls of institutions, noticing corruption, racism, systemic oppression. We have a healthy skepticism of authority. All of that can be really helpful. Yet this means the responsibility for choosing who to trust and how to live falls even more heavily upon each one of us as individuals.

These days, all individuals can easily become authors using the tools of social media. We can publish our thoughts widely. We can claim authority based on our own experiences. It can be really liberating and helpful to speak our voices out into the world. Yet when we're all speaking, asserting, and opining, it can also get really loud and angry. Uninformed opinions start to carry as much weight as evidence, research and facts. Last May so many said, "It's time to get back to normal", as if their word was authoritative. Yet just because I want the virus to be under control doesn't mean it actually is. The loudest, most persistent, persuasive individual voices can become tyrannical.

Actually, all of us can become tyrannical because all of us are captive to sin. We're not so different from the man in the synagogue who was bound by an unclean spirit. The unclean spirits of pride, arrogance, racism, white supremacy, sexism, homophobia, ableism plague us all in different ways. Evil has power over us. We are captive to sin and cannot free ourselves. And we don't even know how to breathe right.

Into all this chaos, another voice speaks - a voice with true liberating authority. Jesus speaks with the very voice of God, the voice that authored all of creation. In the beginning, when the earth was just a formless void of chaos, God spoke creation into being. God said let there be life and there was life. That same voice spoke through Moses and the prophets to set God's people free from Egypt and Babylon, to bring new life out of chaos again and again.

When Jesus was baptized, that voice announced, "You are my beloved." The heavens were torn open and the Spirit descended upon Jesus. And then that day in the synagogue, Jesus spoke with the very voice of God to call out the unclean spirit and free the man. Jesus used his own authority not for his own gain but to liberate a person in need.

This voice still speaks today.

God speaks through scripture, sermon, sacraments and song to each of us, to you.

God speaks to name and call out all the sin and evil that has us bound.

God speaks to announce: You are my beloved and you are forgiven. Nothing can separate you from me.

You are free, now go set others free. Use your power, your voice, your life to serve others to help them know that they, too, are loved and forgiven.

As Pr. Aimée Frye Appell writes:

"Among the many voices clamoring for our service, only one clamors to serve us. Only one authority, the One whose voice spoke the world into being, offers to relinquish power, stand with the exploited, and work for justice and redemption. The author of the universe frees us to serve God and the world God loves." (From *Sundays and Seasons: Preaching*.)

Pastor Steve Garnaas-Holmes [on his blog *Unfolding Light*] puts it this way. He writes:

"Let [God's] word cut into you.

Not a proposition you should agree with,

not a doctrine to believe,

but a revelation that astounds

with authenticity that rings,

a seeing of your soul,

an opening that draws you in,

a pool you look deep into until you fall.

With love that overrules any authority on this earth,

let it take your breath away,

and give you new breath.

Let it uncover something in you.

Let it, with authority, ask of you.

Let it author a new story in you."

Let's take a moment for silent prayer.