

The Fourth Sunday After the Epiphany, January 31, 2021

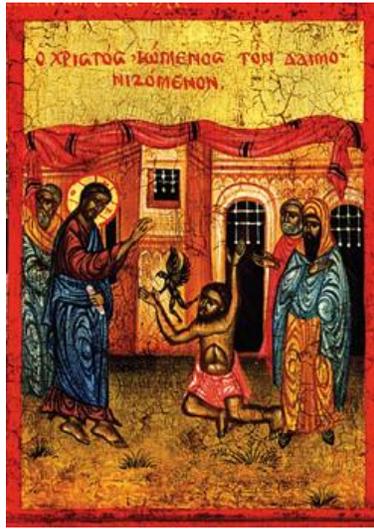
“Having Authority”

A Sermon based on Deuteronomy 18:15-22 and Mark 1:21-28

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Deuteronomy 18:18, 21-22 ~ ¹⁸ *I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their own people; I will put my words in the mouth of the prophet, who shall speak to them everything that I command. ...* ²¹ *You may say to yourself, “How can we recognize a word that the LORD has not spoken?”* ²² *If a prophet speaks in the name of the LORD but the thing does not take place or prove true, it is a word that the LORD has not spoken. The prophet has spoken it presumptuously; do not be frightened by it.*



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Mark 1:21-28 ~ ²¹ *They went to Capernaum; and when the sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught. ²²They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes. ²³Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, ²⁴and 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.” ²⁵But Jesus rebuked him, saying, “Be silent, and come out of him!” ²⁶And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him. ²⁷They were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, “What is this? A new teaching—with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him.” ²⁸At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.*

On Wednesday, January 20, 2021, Americans and people from all around the world gathered around their tvs, computers, or I-Phones to witness an important national event: the inauguration of President Joseph Biden and Vice President Kamala Harris. It was a showcase of our leaders as members of Congress and the Senate, past Presidents and their spouses, Supreme Court Justices, and family members of Biden and Harris took their seats in the west front of the Capitol to witness the swearing in ceremony. While during most previous inaugurations the mall had been filled with crowds of cheering fans, this year, because of the pandemic and threats of violence, the mall was instead covered with nearly 200,00 small flags. There were many memorable moments: Joseph Biden taking the presidential oath of office with his hand on a large Bible with a Celtic cross on it that has been in his family since 1893 held by his wife Dr. Jill Biden; the glass ceiling being broken as Kamala Harris, the first female, African American, and Asian American Vice President, was sworn in by the first Latinx Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor; the music of the U.S. Army Herald Trumpets and U.S. Marine Band, Lady Gaga singing the national anthem, Jennifer Lopez singing “America the Beautiful,” and Garth Brooks performing “Amazing Grace”; Father Leo J. O’Donovan and the Rev. Silvester Beaman offering heartfelt prayers. All of these were memorable moments indeed, but there was one person who absolutely stole the show and will likely be remembered when much else is forgotten. This was when the 22-year-old Amanda Gorman, with her radiant dark skin, dressed in a yellow coat with a bright red hair band holding back her glistening black braids, rose to the podium and delivered the inaugural poem she had written entitled “The Hill We Climb,” taking our breaths away.



Amanda Gorman reciting her inaugural poem “The Hill We Climb”

Against the backdrop of former Presidents, national icons, and musical celebrities she rose to this moment in our nation's history as she spoke truth to power, painting word pictures of our present nation's turmoil with grace-filled gestures, ushering us from the lessons gleaned from painful realities of our nation's past into a hope-filled future, ending with these words:

*When day comes we step out of the shade,
afame and unafraid
The new dawn blooms as we free it
For there is always light,
if only we're brave enough to see it
If only we're brave enough to be it*

We might borrow the words from this week's Gospel lesson when we say that Amanda Gorman "taught them as one having authority." While only 22, she rose above the pack and took her place in history as a prophetic voice in history as one having authority. She did not have authority because of her degrees, professional accomplishments, pedigree, social status, or age. Growing up she was not on anybody's who's who list. Her authority rather emanated from her deepest essence. From an integrity of being. Her very presence commanded it and demanded it. She embodied the truth of this moment and showed a better way into the future, calling forth the divine essence and better angels in each of us. We were awed, inspired, astounded, and amazed by her authority.

Our scripture passage today twice remarks that Jesus spoke with such authority that people were astounded and amazed. We find ourselves today with Jesus in Capernaum. After being baptized by John and next being tempted by Satan for forty days in the wilderness, and, following John's imprisonment and his proclamation that the "kingdom of God is at hand," Jesus called two sets of brothers as his first disciples—Andrew and Simon Peter, James and John—and traveled with them to Capernaum to begin his teaching and healing ministry.

On the Sabbath, Jesus entered into the synagogue where he found a captive audience for his teaching. We don't know what it was he said to those gathered but we learn that his method of teaching was not like that of the scribes, who were scholars of the Torah and expounded a body of propositional knowledge, referring to other rabbis and religious authorities to advance their arguments. Later in the Gospels we see Jesus using a method of teaching unlike this that would often begin with "You have heard it said, but I say to you ..."

Whatever way Jesus taught in Capernaum that day was not what they were used to hearing from the scribes and Mark says that ***“they were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes”*** (vs. 22).

We know nothing of the content of Jesus’ teaching, but my guess is that it was similar to what Luke tells us about Jesus’ inaugural sermon in Luke 4:18-19 when Jesus entered the synagogue, unrolled the scrolls to the prophet Isaiah, and proclaimed:

***18 “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
19 to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”***

One can only imagine that it was a similarly subversive and counter-cultural message speaking to a world oppressed by the Roman Empire in which God showed preferential concern for the poor, the captive, the blind, and the oppressed.

In Mark’s Gospel, any retelling of the content of Jesus’ message was overshadowed by a disruptive man who had an “unclean spirit” or embodied forces contrary to the sacred. We should see this story against the larger backdrop of Jesus having only recently been tempted by Satan for forty days in the wilderness, with his loyalty to God being tested as he emerged triumphant. Here we again see Jesus, who embodies the Spirit of God and the forces of good, being challenged as Satan and the forces working for evil speak through this man, who is crying out and interrupting his teaching at the synagogue, defying him with these accusatory words: ***“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”*** (vs. 24).

This is a spiritual battle between the forces of good and the forces of evil. Only a spiritual force could see so clearly who Jesus was in a way that the others in the synagogue could not. Jesus as “the Holy One of God,” the bearer of the very Spirit of God, was a direct threat to the evil spirit that was in this man as they engaged in spiritual warfare. Jesus faced and directly rebuked the unclean spirit in him with these words: ***“Be silent, and come out of him!” And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him”*** (vs. 25-26). The response of the congregation was that, while they previously had been “astounded” at his teaching, now they were “amazed” as they

turned to each other and “***kept on asking one another, ‘What is this? A new teaching—with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him’***” (vs. 27). A new teaching—with authority.

“Authority” (*exousia*) sometimes has been translated from the Greek with the English word “power.” What does it mean that Jesus was experienced as one whose being had power and authority? We gain insight into what genuine “authority” is when we read this story in relation to the corresponding lectionary passage from Deuteronomy 18:15-20, which describes the legitimate concern that the Hebrew people had about who would lead them and be their spokesperson for God once Moses died. Would they no longer hear the word of God? Moses reassures them that God had a succession plan in place for God would call and empower one from among them to be a prophetic voice speaking to them on God’s behalf. The people asked in response to this statement: “***How can we recognize a word that the LORD has not spoken?***” (vs. 21). Moses then gave them the following litmus test for knowing if a prophet was from God: “***If a prophet speaks in the name of the LORD but the thing does not take place or prove true, it is a word that the LORD has not spoken. The prophet has spoken it presumptuously; do not be frightened by it***” (vs. 22). The criteria are clear. The words spoken must lead to deeds. There must be a congruence between the inner and outer. They must embody the truth. Additionally, since mercy and justice must always be the governing principles in all of life, these deeds must also be life-affirming, healing, and restorative.

We see that Jesus’ words led immediately to action. Jesus spoke and the unclean spirit left the man. God speaks and it is done! Jesus spoke and it was done in the same way that God spoke creation into existence. This led those who witnessed this scene to remark that this was “a new teaching—with authority!” The exclamation mark suggests the heightened positive emotion and excitement that the people felt when in the presence of one with authority. This passage ends by saying that, as the result of word leading to deed, representing a new teaching with authority, “***at once [Jesus’] fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee***” (vs. 28).

Jesus was known as a true prophet because, in keeping with the criteria set out by Moses, his words led to healing, restorative action. But there is more. Do you note the word “true” in the passage from Deuteronomy? A true prophet embodies **truth**. In the opening chapter of the Gospel of John we read:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ... And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth. (Jn 1:1,14).

Jesus was the bearer of grace and truth. These two qualities were what gave Jesus authority as he embodied the very Spirit of God. In addition to being the bearer of grace, Jesus embodied the truth as the Holy One of God. He lived the truth. He spoke the truth to them. And from the truth, Jesus said, comes true freedom. Jesus went on to teach his disciples and us: ***“If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free”*** (Jn 8:31-32). We are to ground our lives and set our moral spiritual compass upon the fundamental principle of truth, as we look to Jesus who is ***“full of grace and truth”*** (Jn 1:14). The embodiment and telling of truth bestow ultimate authority. Truth grounds us in God's desire for the world.

This teaching about the authoritative power of truth is a foundational principle of the perennial wisdom tradition expounded by our Native American sisters and brothers. Steven Charleston, a Choctaw elder and retired Episcopal bishop, in a recent article in *Christian Century* laments how when his: ***“father was born, he was not an American citizen. He was a Native American, the descendant of a people who had lived on this land for thousands of years. But until June 2, 1924, when the federal government bestowed citizenship on Native Americans, he was politically disenfranchised. He could not vote. He could not hold office. He could not help to determine his own future in his own homeland. Many people are surprised to learn how late it was in America's history when Indigenous people were finally able to exercise any political rights. ... Breaking through doubt requires seeing clearly. Realizing, for example, that the United States withheld citizenship from its original inhabitants for so long—in a conscious effort to despoil them by denying them the right to vote or hold office—is painful for those of us who believe in justice. But it is a necessary pain, because it helps us confront the difference between history as truth and history as myth.*** (Steven Charleston, “What Native American political systems can teach us about power and truth telling: My Choctaw ancestors understood the cost of lies” in *Christian Century*, December 30, 2020, p. 34.)

Charleston, who wears the hat both of being a Choctaw elder and an Episcopal Bishop, speaks about how Native American cultures understand and have experienced that society cannot function without truth telling. Indeed, the early European settlers noticed that Native American society was characterized by two traits they found remarkable. First, they were not afraid of death because of the strong sense of

spiritual connection they felt to their ancestors. Second, they always told the truth. Truth telling was understood to be the primary social contract holding people together and is the **“core expectation for all human interactions. Speaking the truth was the highest virtue.”** Society falls apart without it. He wrote that **“systems that do not depend on the truth become corrupt, self-destructive, and eventually lethal.”** (Charleston, p. 36.) They had witnessed this as they were the recipients of institutional lying by those in power. He reminds us that:

The Native American insistence on truth as a nonnegotiable for all social interactions is not a stereotype of the noble savage, perpetuated by Western colonialism. It’s a warning flag from a civilization that witnessed firsthand the cost of lies. The treaties made with our people were lies. The promises made to us were lies. The stories told about us were lies. The motives for taking our land were lies. The reasons for destroying our culture were lies. Few societies are as familiar with the full impact of lies as Native America. We are very experienced with the outcome of institutionalized lying. Therefore, this much we know for certain: systems that do not depend on the truth become corrupt, self-destructive, and eventually lethal. (Charleston, p. 36.)

Because truth telling is the very cornerstone of their lives, the Native American leaders, like the prophets Moses describes who were to come, were chosen from among their community for their ability to deal with real problems and because they were trusted to tell the truth. This is what gave them authority. For it is only from facing the truth that one can find solutions to the human dilemma. From honesty, hope can emerge. Bishop Charleston speaks truth to power when he concludes that for his Native American community and his brothers and sisters in Christ: ***Sacred vision is our holy inheritance. We won’t be saved by how strong we are, nor how wise we are, nor how beautiful we are—only by what we can see through the eyes of the Spirit, for what we see is what we will become.*** (Charleston, p. 36.)

When we pray for the ability to see the world through the eyes of Jesus, we will begin to discern the truth. Jesus was sent to earth, full of grace and truth, as one who taught with authority. God wants us to have authority too. Authority comes from aligning our wills with the will of God, aligning our truth with the truth of God given through the twofold lens of scripture and creation, and, perhaps most importantly, by aligning our hearts with the heart of God characterized by justice and mercy.

Our passage today says that those who gathered on the Sabbath in the synagogue in Capernaum ***“were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes”*** (Mark 1:22). The scribes taught from their analytical, rational brains. They offered instruction using their minds.

Jesus, who taught as one having authority, offered transformation that flowed not only from his mind but primarily from his heart. His was a wisdom flowing from the very heartbeat of God. As followers of Jesus who also are called upon to offer God’s grace and truth to a hurting world, perhaps we too should interact with the world not so much with our minds poisoned by the world but rather by turning to the God-given wisdom of our hearts.

I offer to you today, at a moment in our history when nothing is more important than telling the truth, a spiritual practice known as “heartmath.” This upcoming week identify a moment when you lived with absolute integrity, feeling aligned with God, connected to those around you, hearts filled with gratitude, when the world seemed to be beautiful, and you felt valued, spacious, and inwardly free. Spend time not only thinking about that moment but also viscerally feeling that moment in all its intensity. Then make that difficult twelve-inch move from your head to your heart. Feel that moment you imagined in your physical heart. Next, experience the grace and wisdom gifted to you by God in your spiritual heart, which is the core of your being. And then I challenge you to go out into the world being led not by the ever-changing thoughts and whims of your brain but by the truths that God has engraved upon your hearts as you put your hand into the hand of Jesus who taught as one having authority. I promise that you too will see the world and those around you in new ways and also, with those gathered that Sabbath day in the synagogue in Capernaum, you will be astounded at how Jesus taught as one having authority as the truth will set you free!

Closing Prayer: God, we thank you for sending your son Jesus into the world. He is the one the man with the unclean spirit would correctly identify as “the Holy One of God.” Jesus is the one you sent who was full of grace and truth. It was because of these qualities that he had and has authority in our lives. We pray that we also might be bearers of grace and truth in our hurting world and that we, like Jesus, might bring healing.
Amen.