

Deuteronomy 18:15-20

¹⁵The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own people; you shall heed such a prophet ¹⁶This is what you requested of the LORD your God at Horeb on the day of the assembly when you said: “If I hear the voice of the LORD my God any more, or ever again see this great fire, I will die.” ¹⁷Then the LORD replied to me: “They are right in what they have said. ¹⁸I 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. ¹⁹Anyone who does not heed the words that the prophet shall speak in my name, I myself will hold accountable. ²⁰But any prophet who speaks in the name of other gods, or who presumes to speak in my name a word that I have not commanded the prophet to speak—that prophet shall die.”

Psalms 111 (UMH 832)

1 Corinthians 8:1-13

¹Now concerning food sacrificed to idols: we know that “all of us possess knowledge.” Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up. ²Anyone who claims to know something does not yet have the necessary knowledge; ³but anyone who loves God is known by him. ⁴Hence, as to the eating of food offered to idols, we know that “no idol in the world really exists,” and that “there is no God but one.” ⁵Indeed, even though there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth—as in fact there are many gods and many lords—⁶yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist. ⁷It is not everyone, however, who has this knowledge. Since some have become so accustomed to idols until now, they still think of the food they eat as food offered to an idol; and their conscience, being weak, is defiled. ⁸“Food will not bring us close to God.” We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do. ⁹But take care that this liberty of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak. ¹⁰For if others see you, who possess knowledge, eating in the temple of an idol, might they not, since their conscience is weak, be encouraged to the point of eating food sacrificed to idols? ¹¹So by your knowledge those weak believers for whom Christ died are destroyed ¹²But when you thus sin against members of your family and wound their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ. ¹³Therefore, if food is a cause of their falling I will never eat meat, so that I may not cause one of them to fall.

Mark 1:21-28

²¹They 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.

The New Revised Standard Version of the Bible with Apocrypha

God of Grace and God of Glory

Harry Emerson Fosdick was the author of the hymn we just sang. Fosdick was ordained in 1903 as a Baptist minister. He was obviously a man of great talent, but controversial.

John D. Rockefeller, however, recognized his talent and asked him to serve as pastor of Park Avenue Baptist Church in New York City. Fosdick refused, in part because of Rockefeller's wealth and in part because Park Avenue Baptist Church was too swank. Rockefeller didn't give up, though, and he finally persuaded Fosdick to be the pastor of a new church that he would build in a more modest area near Harlem -- Riverside Church. After gaining a number of concessions, Fosdick finally agreed. He wrote **God of Grace and God of Glory** to be sung at the opening service of that great church.

This hymn is a prayer -- a prayer for God to bestow power upon the church -- and wisdom -- and courage "for the facing of this hour." The hour that they were facing at that time was the Great Depression -- an economic disaster that drained the nation of life and hope. "For the facing of this hour," however, is a timeless phrase, because there is never a time when we do not need God's help "for the facing of this hour."

"Save us from weak resignation" is an important part of the prayer. "Save us from weak resignation to the evils we deplore." We are always tempted to believe that the evils that we face overpower our resources to deal with them -- tempted to retreat into a safe place and wait for the storm to blow over -- but evil unopposed doesn't blow over. It takes the sacrifices of dedicated men and women to build a better world.

"Grant us wisdom, grant us courage, for the facing of this hour." That was a good prayer when Fosdick first wrote the hymn in 1930. It is still a good prayer today.

Words of Authority

We live in a world full of words. Words are all around us, words on TV, words on the radio, words spoken by family and friends, words in newspapers, books, on computers, and words on the Internet. The words all around us have turned us into people who have been overwhelmed, suffocated, and buried in words. With so many words around us, they tend to lose their meaning, they become unimportant, we no longer pay attention to them and no longer have any value or influence in our life. But there are some words which have more power than others.

Pastor Valbracht tells the following story about words, *"It was in the early years of my ministry that one Sunday preaching my sermon and I had just gotten well into the sermon, when a baby started to cry down in one of the front pews. The mother, very much embarrassed, snatched up the baby and started out the aisle. I stopped right in my sermon, and I said, 'Madam you don't have to take that baby out. He isn't bothering me.' She said, 'No?' Well, you're certainly bothering him."*

Another story gives an entirely different view of words. A New York columnist set out to prove that no one really listened to what anyone said at a cocktail party. So when he was invited to a party, he decided to arrive late. When he arrived the hostess greeted him and he explained why he was late. *"I had to stop for a moment and murder my mistress, and it took longer than I thought."* Without blinking an eye, the hostess said she understood perfectly, *"I was almost late myself, everyone is quite busy. Enjoy yourself. Have a good time."*

As he mingled around the party, someone asked him what he did for a living. *"Oh, I am the executioner for the State Penitentiary."* The person continued, "Well, that must be an interesting line of work. How does business look this year?"

We are caught up in a sea of words. Some words do have special power and authority, others have no meaning at all. Sometimes words only have meaning, power and authority, because of the listener, or because of the speaker.

Lately there has been a renewal of interest in Celtic saints. Their places of origin include Ireland, Scotland, Wales, Cornwall, and Brittany. Many of them lived a thousand to fifteen hundred years ago. We know in some detail the lives of some of them, such as St. Patrick. In many other cases, what's known about them is barely enough to fill an index card. Yet even so, the memory of the saint lingers on in the name of some place--a well, a church, a village--as if to say that once, long ago, a holy woman or a holy man lived here in deep communion with God, and that now, many centuries later, that still makes a difference. It makes a difference that this nearly anonymous figure lived a true life. They had authority then - and they have authority now.

In today's gospel lesson, we hear how Jesus spoke God's word and how that word had authority, power, and hope for living. Let's look at Jesus' words this morning, because they are God's word incarnate in this world. These words take on a special meaning for our lives. Jesus' words *do* have authority, power, and hope for the future.

The passage says, *"They went to Capernaum,"* the prophet Nahum's village, and the place where Jesus made his home away from home. He was originally, you'll remember, from Nazareth. But the people in Nazareth were like the people in our hometowns: they knew Jesus *back when*. Because they knew Jesus *back when*, they would not let him be what God wanted him to be. Not in their town. So he moved to Capernaum. We find him in this passage on the Lord's day, in the Lord's house. I like that. Jesus went to church. A man--all man--in church.

Jesus entered the synagogue at Capernaum and began to teach. There's nothing unusual about that. Any Jewish man could teach in the synagogue. What's unusual was the response he received. The congregation was astounded! Mark says, *"And they were astonished at his teaching, for he taught them as one who had authority, and not as the scribes."* Jesus was not like so many other teachers they had heard. He did not cite a series of authorities, piling up learned references one upon another. Instead, he taught out of his own authority. It is his own truth that he set forth.

And what was the content of his teaching there at Capernaum? Mark's Gospel doesn't tell us. There's not even a hint! What Jesus teaches is not a series of facts, observations, or theories. His teaching is himself. He does more than set forth truth. He is the Truth, Truth with a capital "T". The Truth - looking at you face to face.

Jesus came and he spoke with authority. He didn't quote any past learned men, he was the sole authority for his words. He had authority, the authority of God. For in John's gospel in the prologue, it says, *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father.*

God's word, the word that God used to create, the authoritative word of God that brought things into existence. That word was incarnate in Jesus. Jesus spoke with the authority which was present from the beginning of time.

That authoritative word of Jesus was a word which knew what was needed and what was best for God's children. It was a word of liberation, a word of comfort, a word of release, a word of pardon which Jesus spoke at the very beginning of his public ministry, as in Mark 1:15: *"The time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God is at hand, repent, and believe in the gospel."*

Jesus announced through his presence, God's kingdom is now present in this world. Those words stood tall among the people, because Jesus had the kind of authority, the kind of presence which allowed people to believe that his kingdom was indeed God's kingdom.

The text says, ²³ ¶ And immediately there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit; ²⁴ 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."* ²⁵ But Jesus rebuked him, saying, *"Be silent, and come out of him!"* ²⁶ And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him.

What do you think about when you hear Bible verses where Jesus encounters evil spirits? Do you take the passage at face value? Or do you think something like *"Gee, that guy must have had some sort of mental disease, and they just thought he had an evil spirit in him because they didn't know any better back then."* I used to think that way, but now I'm not so sure. And I don't seem to be alone. Look at television and movies these days. Look at the number of shows about ghosts, and spirits, and vampires, and other supernatural beings. Evil spirits are on the minds of many people these days.

At least, I think we have to admit the existence of some type of evil beyond human control and comprehension. How else can you explain how the Earth is so messed up so much of the time. While we tend to think of evil in abstract terms today, demons and people influenced by demons were a common part of the world view in New Testament times. Jesus' demonstration of power in that synagogue affirms that God's power extends to things beyond human control and

comprehension.

There was a power in Jesus' words, a power to bring healing strength and forgiveness into the life of that man. With his words, Jesus brought that man into a relationship with him. The power of Jesus' words affects lives. One author says *"Each week we assemble as the ones who carry the disease of sin. We cry out 'Son of God, have mercy on us.' And Christ's own powerful Word says, 'Arise, go forth and live. The demons obey him, they are out and away. The grip of sin and death is broken. We are free to live as a new people of God."*

The cosmic battle of sin has been fought and Jesus has won. But this battle continues day in and day out for each of us. And it is only through the powerful word of Christ that we can hope to win. It is only through His word and His word alone that victory for a fleeting moment is ours on this earth.

And that brings us to the final word, the word of Hope.

Because Jesus has authority, because he has power, because his words do affect our lives, then we are people who can and do live with hope. Hope that things can be changed, things can be different, things, lives, people can be made whole through the authority and power of Jesus Christ. We can live life as victors instead of victims because of the hope we have in Jesus Christ to redeem our lives, to bring forth his authority and power in our everyday life.

Maxie Dunnam says in her book, *Dancing At My Funeral*, *"I am dancing in the face of tragedy over which I have no control except to trust God and life and circumstance. I am able to live in the presence of death because I trust myself as a victor rather than a victim."*

But the key to God's using and giving us hope is lost when we let problems get in the way of praise. Think about how problems in your life cause you to say, *"I don't want to pray. Lord, just leave me alone."* But when you praise God in spite of problems, it is precious, and it is priceless, and God will give you hope.

Reverend Charles Walker tells a story that illustrates this for me. He was holding a revival in New England and the man who was assigned to take him back and forth every night to the hotel was a man who could not speak the king's English. He spoke good African American English, but he couldn't speak the king's English. He never did say "revival" the whole week. He said "vavibal." He said, *"Reverend, that 'vavibal' blessed me."*

The last night, as they headed to the airport Charles remarked that though the man didn't speak the king's English, he had "money's mammy." He was driving a Lincoln that was so high that Charles said he couldn't even read those Roman numerals. He wore a three-carat diamond pinky ring, Brooks Brothers shoes, and a three-hundred dollar suit. The man said, *"Reverend, you don't understand how I got this. I got it by putting the Lord first in my life and praising God in spite of problems."*

Charles looked at him and the man continued, *"See, folks see a car, they want to go get a car. They see a suit and a house, they try to get that. You know the Word says, Reverend, 'Seek ye first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these here things will be added unto you.'* The man said, *"Let me tell you how I know that's true. Me and my wife been married over forty years. And during the depression I lost my job and we spent all of our life savings."* And he said, *"One Saturday night both of us wanted to go to church the next morning and our church were eight miles away from where we lived, the bus fare were ten cents, and we only had fifteen cents to our names, my wife said, 'Honey, tell you what you do. What you do is you walk to church in the morning, and when you get to church you put a nickel in, and when you leave, you'll have a dime to ride back, 'cause it only cost a dime to ride in those days.*

"And I got up, and I walked to church. I was tired, but it were a beautiful day, and as I were walking, I just felt blessed because I thought about people who didn't have no legs to walk. When I got to church, as soon as I stepped inside the sanctuary, the Holy Ghost said, 'Put the whole fifteen cents in.' And I started arguing with the Lord. I said, 'No, no. No, no. "Seek ye first" don't mean that. I done walked all the way here."

The man continued, *"The choir started singing the processional. They were singing, 'How I got over. My soul looks back and wonders...'* But all I could hear them singing was, *'Put the whole fifteen cents in.'* When it came time for the offering, I lost the argument. I was rubbing my dime and my nickel together, and like a drum beating in my head, it kept beating over and over again, *'Put the whole fifteen cents in.'* I put it in; I watched that offering plate take our last money in the world further and further away from me.

"But don't you know the Lord blessed me through the Word. The sermon that Sunday were, 'They that wait upon the LORD shall renew their strength. They shall mount up with wings as eagles.' When I left church I felt like one of them eagles. I was feeling good. I were ready to walk that eight miles back home.

"I got one block from the church and a strange lady stopped me. She said, 'Mister, I don't know you, and I don't know if you need work or not, but, here, take this address, and if you do need work they're hiring there tomorrow.' And I said, *'Thank you, Jesus.'* I walked another block, and the Spirit of the Lord said, *'Look down.'* When I looked down I seen a dime, and I said, *'Thank you, Jesus.'"*

He concluded his story: *"As soon as I picked the dime up, a bus were coming, and I said, 'Thank you, Jesus.'* I got up on the bus, I put my dime in, and the bus driver give me back fifteen cents change. I said, *'Mister, I ain't give you no quarter; I give you a dime.'* The bus driver said, *'Shut up, man, and sit down.'* I said, *'Thank you, Jesus.'*

"I got back home on the Lord's day, blessed by the Lord's Word, blessed by the Lord's work, blessed by the Lord with a job, blessed by the Lord with the same fifteen cents I left home with. And that job I went to the next day to interview, boy, I held that job for thirty-three years. Thank you, Jesus."

If you're sick, Jesus can make you well.
Even if you're dying, Jesus can make up your dying bed.
If you're depressed, Jesus can get you up.
If you're down, Jesus can pick you up.
If you've fallen, Jesus can hold you up.
If you're in sin, Jesus can fix you up.
Tempted and tried? Jesus can give you the victory.
Where you're weak and defeated, his grace is still sufficient.
Stained from sin? His blood can still wash you.
In need of a savior? He still saves from the guttermost to the uttermost.
He is good for whatever ails you.
It does not make any difference what your situation is.
If Jesus touches you, he'll bless you in really unexpected ways.
He'll get you up from wherever you are and fix you up in ways you never imagined.
God will fix it for you. Won't he fix it? He's a good God!
Amen.