

*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.*

A few times it has happened to me. Everything comes together in an hour of worship. Hymns and lessons and sermon and prayers and communion all come together and there is a calm and a peace and a focus. In that moment I have a sense that God is truly among us – in us.

Maybe it was like that for some that day. Jesus was teaching – powerfully teaching. The people were really getting into it. We read: They were astounded at his teaching for he taught as one having authority and not as their scribes.

Suddenly there was a man crying 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." The mood was broken. No one would be going home that day telling how peace-filled was that hour of worship. Noise, interruption, conflict - who goes to worship to experience these? But on that day God was at work.

Jesus rebuked the unclean spirit that was in the man, saying, "Be silent, and come out of him." And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying out with a loud voice, came out of him. And the people were amazed.

On the holy day, in the holy place in the presence of the Holy One of God there was conflict - not peace, but battle.

It is as if the unclean spirit in that man could not sit in silence in the presence of Jesus. Jesus teaching provoked that spirit into crying out. "Have you come to destroy us?"

The answer was yes – Jesus had come to announce the Kingdom of God – the rule of God over all things and every one - God's rule over a man who was owned by an unclean spirit - God's rule over you.

What if Jesus gathers us here not to soothe us but to drive out all that is opposed to God? What if each week you and I gathered here in the hope that God might change us? What if we listened to God's word expecting a confrontation between the holiness of God and the sin in us?

In Ephesians we read of the Word of God which is the sword of the Spirit. A sword is for cutting and slicing and destroying. The sword of the Spirit is the Word of God. I open the scriptures looking for a comforter in which I can wrap myself on a cold night. But for the Spirit the Word of God is a sword used to slaughter all evil and sin within me.

What happened when Jesus, the Word made flesh, entered synagogues or the temple? When he entered his home synagogue in Nazareth at the beginning of his ministry his words stirred up conflict. By the end of that visit the people wanted to take Jesus out and hurl him off a cliff.

On other occasions Jesus healed on the Sabbath in the synagogue and sparked the hostility of the religious leaders.

When Jesus went to the temple in Jerusalem it was with a whip of cords to drive out those who sold and exchanged money in the temple.

Later the temple was the place where he argued with religious leaders of his people.

People are still people. Religious leaders are still religious leaders. Because we confess our faith in Jesus does not change our temptation to greed – our desire for self-justification – our habit of thinking ourselves more special than the stranger who comes in our midst. The Word of God is the sword the Holy Spirit uses on us to attack these habits.

I don't like it. I want God's word to tell me that God is delighted in the choices I have made this past week. I want God's approval – not God's mercy. But the scriptures reveal to me week after week that it is God's mercy that I need.

But you say: “But when do we get beyond all of that. Did not St. Paul say that the Kingdom of God is righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit?”

There is an often spoken saying: The gospel comforts the afflicted and afflicts the comfortable.” On the one hand we read that “the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart.” On the other hand John tells us that “the word became flesh and dwelt among us full of grace and truth.” With the weak, and sinners Jesus was gentle in his ministry – offering forgiveness and mercy and love.

The synagogues were places of conflict – yes, but also of healing. So it is here. When you come full of sorrow and in weakness Jesus lifts you up – when pride is your dress the word cuts you down.

And through it all Jesus is loving you. Whether destroying all that is not worthy of God or bandaging up your wounds everything God does through his word is done in love.