

*4<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Epiphany*  
*February 1, 2009*  
*Text: Mark 1:21-28*  
*The Reverend David B. Hodges*

You may have seen or you may have what is known as a “red-letter edition” of the Bible.

In a red-letter Bible, the words of Jesus are printed in red. The idea came from a man named Louis Klopsch who was the editor of a Christian magazine and someone who was very committed to making sure that people had a chance to read and to understand the Bible.

The first red-letter Bible was published in 1899 under the title, *The New Testament... With All the Words Recorded Therein, as Having Been Spoken by Our Lord, Printed in Color.* The idea for printing all of Jesus’ words in red, symbolizing the color of his blood, came from a verse found in Luke’s Gospel in which Jesus says, *This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you.* (22:20). This is how Klopsch describes his version of the Bible.

*In the Red Letter Bible, more clearly than in any other edition of the Holy Scriptures, it becomes plain that from beginning to end, the central figure upon which all lines of law, history, poetry and prophecy converge is Jesus Christ, the Saviour of the world.*

A few minutes ago, we heard a reading from the first chapter of Mark’s Gospel, verses twenty-one through twenty eight. In those eight verses -- like the twenty before them -- we hear

about, and learn a lot about, Jesus. It is widely believed by biblical scholars that even though it isn't placed in the New Testament as the first book, Mark was the first Gospel written. As you begin to read it the thing that *immediately*, which is a word Mark uses a lot, the thing that immediately jumps out at you is the urgent way he tells the story.

Mark begins by describing John the Baptist, his ministry, and the baptism of Jesus by him in the Jordan River. He then moves directly into telling us how Jesus spent forty days alone in the desert, and then tells the story of how he called his first four disciples. That brings us to where we are this morning: we read about the beginning of his ministry in a place called Capernaum, where Jesus goes into a synagogue to teach and is confronted by someone possessed by a demon that he gets rid of, and then finally we're told that -- because of what he does -- his fame quickly begins to spread. All of that in twenty-eight verses of the first chapter.

I want to read to you again the part of Mark's Gospel that we are focusing on today.

***They went to Capernaum, and when the Sabbath came, Jesus went into the synagogue and began to teach. The people were amazed at his teaching, because he taught them as one who had authority, not as the teachers of the law. Just then a man in their synagogue who was possessed by an evil spirit cried out, "What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are—the Holy One of God!" "Be quiet!" said Jesus sternly. "Come out of him!" The evil spirit shook the man violently and came out of him with a shriek. The people were all so amazed that they asked each other, "What is this? A new teaching—and with authority! He even gives orders to evil spirits and they obey him." News about him spread quickly over the whole region of Galilee.***

Now if I had been reading from a red-letter edition of the Bible, there wouldn't be much in red at all. In fact, the only words of Jesus in this particular passage are the ones he speaks to the evil spirit. We are told that the "people were amazed at his teaching, because he taught them as one who had authority" -- but there aren't any words in red that tell us what he said to them, because that is the way that Mark chooses to tell us his story about the life of Jesus.

In these few verses that fit into the first chapter of this account of the life of Jesus, Mark begins to focus on those who heard this story for the first time, and now he focuses on that which he feels is so important. As Louis Klopsch said about the purpose of the red-letter Bible, Mark pushes and drives us to see Jesus as the Savior of the world as the *central figure upon which all lines of law, history, poetry and prophecy converge*. From the beginning of his story about Jesus, he begins to immediately take us to what will happen at the end when Jesus dies on a cross and is then resurrected from the dead. But there is a lot that happens between the beginning and the end, and a lot written about what he did -- but there isn't a lot that is said about what Jesus said.

We know he taught in synagogues and in lots of other places. He exorcised demons, he healed the sick, he fed people, he spent time with people that the religious leaders and others

thought he should not even acknowledge -- and of course all of this involved him speaking and saying lots of things. But what Mark wants us to see, and what Mark pushes us to see, is the person of Jesus Christ, and how through the things he did and said, and in the various encounters he had with people, the one who was the Son of God amazed and astonished them and changed their lives.

I read something recently written by a bishop in the Methodist Church who was telling a story about something he did when he was a young pastor. In an attempt to find out what people in his parish were really getting out of his sermons, he decided to ask them. One Sunday as people were leaving church, he had an acolyte hand out a sheet of paper that had one question on it. "What idea do you remember from today's sermon?"

The results, he said, were depressing. Most people said they couldn't remember even one idea from the sermon, and some had an idea listed that wasn't even part of what he had preached about. Not feeling very good about the responses or his preaching, he decided to talk to someone he refers to as a "wise woman" in his congregation -- and when he did, she asked him a question: "Where did you get the idea that a sermon is about ideas?" Everybody," she went on to say,

“knows the purpose of a sermon is to meet Jesus and to be amazed that he hasn’t given up on us yet” (William Willimon in *Pulpit Resource*, Vol. 37, No. 1, pg. 23.)

Though we don’t know what he said to them that day in Capernaum, we do know that people who were with Jesus were “amazed” at his teaching and amazed at what he did to command an evil spirit to leave a man possessed by that spirit. Being in his presence, and being made very much aware of the fact that because of the things he did and the things he said lives were being changed, left them amazed and astonished and wanting more.

After hearing what the woman in his congregation had to say about the purpose of a sermon, that young pastor said that he immediately knew that she was right. “You come here,” he says, “not so much to receive information or instruction. You come here to be astonished. And the good news, Jesus is utterly astonishing.”

It is through what we experience when we come into this holy place for worship that we are given a chance to meet Jesus. It is through what we experience when we receive the sacrament of Holy Communion that we are given a chance to meet Jesus. It is what we experience through the various ways in which we carry out our ministries that we are given a chance to meet Jesus again and again and to be amazed. That “wise woman” was exactly right

when she said that what we really need and want is to meet him, to be amazed and to know that he hasn't given up on us yet.

And the good news of this day is that as we come together in this place for worship on this Sunday morning, as we read and hear God's holy word to us, as we take into our bodies the body and blood of Christ, and as we think about what we have to give of ourselves to him through our time our talent and our treasure, we are given yet another chance to be amazed and astonished. The good news of this day is that once again we have been able to meet Jesus and to be assured that no matter what we have done or have not done Jesus hasn't given up on us yet and never will and that is amazing. Thanks be to God!

Let us pray. *Come to us, Lord Jesus, come. Move in among us, intrude into our lives, amaze us and fill us with astonishment. Come to us, Lord Jesus, come. Let us know that you are a living God and constantly remind us, we pray, that no matter what you will never give up on us. Amen.*