

## The 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday After the Epiphany (Year B)

February 1, 2015

### *It's Game Day*

The Reverend Amanda A. Akes

#### **Appointed Readings:**

Deuteronomy 18:15-20

N/A

Psalms 111:1-10

Mark 1:21-28

Does anyone know what today is, what makes it stand out among other days? Today is game day, it's Super Bowl Sunday! One of the biggest sporting events in the US, the super bowl is the most watched annual TV program in America. Super Bowl Sunday is the second-largest day of food consumption in the United States. Any guesses about the first? That's right Thanksgiving! TV sales and rentals skyrocket just before the Super Bowl. And there's been talk about making the Monday following the Super Bowl a national holiday. Another 3-day weekend folks! That's how BIG this day has become.

Whether or not we actually *like* football, a significant portion of our country follows the same routine on Super Bowl Sunday. Family and friends gather together to watch the big game. Some are avid football fans intent upon every pass and play. Others enjoy the commercials more than the actual game. Some people just tune in for

the halftime show. And others could care less about anything on the TV screen - they prefer the socializing aspects such an event offers.

If you're going to watch the Super Bowl, either at your place or a friend's, usually the TV will be turned on and tuned in, ready to go way before the actual game starts. NBC, knowing that this will ultimately happen is offering a 6 and a half hour pre-game show! 6 and a half hours! That means that pretty soon after you get home from church, you can tune in and get clued in to game predictions by celebrity personalities, see pre-game footage, and more. All the information that you could ever want to know about the Seattle Seahawks and the New England Patriots are guaranteed to be on the air. The point of the pre-game show is to get us revved up for the actual game. It's the pre-amble, the build up to the game to make us want it *even* more!

Some of our New Testament gospels have a similar pre-amble to get us revved up for the main attraction of Jesus' life and ministry. The gospels of Matthew and Luke contain previews of the coming attraction. They include two differing examples of Jesus' genealogy. They also present two unique birth narratives. Luke even included an account of Jesus as a pre-teen teaching his elders in the Temple. We get no such pre-amble or introduction in Mark's gospel. Mark begins

his narrative with the following words, “The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, Son of God.”

From here, Mark leaps straight into stories of Jesus’ adult life beginning with his baptism, and followed by his summoning followers. For the past couple of weeks, we’ve heard these stories in our weekly gospel accounts. Today we continue in Mark’s account of Jesus’ life and ministry with an action-packed tale.

Today in Mark’s gospel we hear about traveling, teaching with authority, demon-possessed confrontation followed by exorcism, and the beginning of Jesus’ fame. That’s a lot of action in 8 little scripture verses! We’re in the first quarter of the big game of Jesus’ life. No pre-game show here – just action-packed events – exactly what we crave!

Jesus’ actions in the synagogue are equivalent to the first touchdown in this, the big game of his life. Think of this scripture passage as Jesus’ first big play. This is the first time, according to Mark, that Jesus reveals who he really and truly is. The people of Capernaum recognize Jesus as one with authority. The man with the unclean spirit recognizes Jesus as the Holy One of God. Here at the outset of Jesus’ public ministry, we learn quite clearly and quickly that Jesus is the authoritative Holy One of God.

Mark wants us to know, Jesus is uniquely commissioned and empowered to declare and institute the reign of God. And it is through Jesus that we glimpse characteristics of this reign. The reign of God is intrusive, breaking old boundaries that benefited another kind of rule. Jesus reveals a boundary breaking God. We see this throughout Mark's gospel. Each and every boundary humanity tries to put in place, that humanity thinks is in place, even that which is perceived as impenetrable, God bursts through! Political, social, religious, ethnic, racial, sexual, gendered, cosmic, even the final boundary we persist in thinking is beyond God's ability to shatter -- death. This boundary breaking God is about liberating people from false powers that afflict them and that keep creation from flourishing.

We see this in the way Jesus casts out the unclean spirits that possess the man in the Capernaum synagogue. When Jesus strips the unclean spirits of the ability to inhabit their human host, he also denies their capability to have an entrenched influence in the world. Losing opportunities to win over people's bodies and minds, they lose the authority they were thought to have. This exorcism does not eliminate evil and oppression; rather it denies those kinds of forces the

authority to hold ultimate sway over people's lives. It breaks their power and the power they have over us.

Jesus' presence, words, and deeds threaten forces that claim authority over our lives. This passage provokes us to stop assuming that "the way things are" must always equal "the way things have to be" or "should be." The reign of God promises more. The reign of God promises that our God is here with us in the midst of the unclean spirits, powers, and systems that hold sway over us. And God is working in the world to transform and transcend them.

Within the last week and a half a federal judge in Mobile struck down the ban on marriage equality in Alabama. Alabama, traditionally a state with a perverse climate of hate towards the GLBTQ community. A state with disproportionately high suicide rates among gay people. A state with clearly laid boundaries about what is acceptable and what is not regarding human sexuality and expression. It is in this state, that on January 23 U.S. District Judge Callie ruled in favor of equality, striking down Alabama's discriminatory constitutional amendment banning same-sex couples from marrying. I have friends in Alabama, who work for the Human Rights Campaign. They are the ones on the ground, advocating change and equality. These friend welcomed this

news with champagne and prayers of thanksgiving. They've been awaiting the day they could marry the person they loved, and find legal equality. My brothers and sisters, talk about boundaries being broken! Talk about the reign of God breaking through our human barriers. This is an example of a community being liberated from false powers that afflict and that sought to keep them from flourishing. This is an example of God's reign of justice, compassion, and mercy transforming and transcending the injustice, hate, and brokenness of our world.

Jesus changes people's lives - he removes unclean spirits and powers that stifle us - and he does so with an authoritative teaching that leaves us all astounded and forever changed. The power that worked in and through Jesus is alive and at work in our world today. In Alabama, in DC, and right here in Silver Spring. God's spirit continues to push and shatter boundaries that contradict God's reign. And God does this work through us. We are baptized and anointed with God's Spirit, commissioned to engage in the same life-giving work of our Lord, Jesus Christ.

The Right Reverend Rob Wright, Bishop of Atlanta, was the keynote speaker at the convention of the Episcopal Diocese of Washington this weekend. In his convention address Bp. Wright said,

“the greatest gift we can give to the world is our baptized flesh.”

Friends, our baptized flesh is infused with promise and power. We are members of the body of Christ. We are His hands and feet in this place and time. We, you and I, are the boundary breakers. We are heirs of Jesus Christ and heralders of justice, compassion, and reconciliation. How are you using this heritage, this power, to bring God’s light and life to the world?

Jesus began his work in Capernaum. Where did yours begin? Here and now is the place and the time. It’s game day. Amen.

*\*\*\* The content of this reflection is greatly based on work from Matt Skinner, Associate Professor of New Testament at Luther Seminary and Karoline Lewis, Associate Professor of Preaching, at Luther Seminary found on [www.workingpreacher.org](http://www.workingpreacher.org).*