

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, February 28, 2021**

**TRAVELS WITH JESUS:
IN CAPERNAUM**

Luke 4:31-44

What is the most memorable trip (or one of the most unforgettable trips) you have ever taken? For me, it has to be the trip Mary Sue and I took to Israel in 2015, with a tour group that included a number of longtime friends, some going way back to our campus ministry days in the late 1970s with the Coalition for Christian Outreach (aka CCO). Unforgettable. The trip of a lifetime. One I would love to repeat.

Aside from that trip to Israel, one of the most memorable trips I've ever taken was a 2-week residency at Gordon-Conwell Seminary in Massachusetts in January 2005 that was part of my Doctor of Ministry program. In addition to our classroom seminars, our cohort took several "field trips" during those two weeks to visit places of significance in the spiritual history of New England and beyond. We visited Northampton, MA, where Jonathan Edwards served as a pastor for more than 20 years, and the cemetery where missionary David Brainerd and several members of the Edwards family are buried. We visited the home of Dwight L. Moody in Northfield, MA, as well as the location of the shoe store in Boston where Edward Kimball led Moody to faith in Christ. We visited Ipswich, where George Whitefield preached to a crowd of 10,000 or more in a huge field. In Newburyport, we saw the house in which Whitefield died and the church where he is buried in a crypt beneath the pulpit. In Boston, we saw the grave of Puritan leader John Winthrop, who in 1630 invoked Jesus' image of a "city on a hill" to inspire the Puritan colonists who settled in Massachusetts to be faithful to their calling to be distinctly Christian in all their ways. We visited the church in Salem, from which America's first Protestant foreign missionaries were commissioned in 1810. Not quite the same as a trip to Israel, to walk where Jesus Himself walked, but still a remarkable journey to gain insight into the historic foundations of the Christian faith in New England and beyond. It is a trip I will always treasure, although I do not recommend New England in January.

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As we continue our travels with Jesus in the Gospels, the scene shifts today from Nazareth to Capernaum. Though He was born in Bethlehem, Nazareth, up north in Galilee, is where Jesus grew up. Nazareth was His hometown. It is where His family and childhood friends were. But after His rejection by the people of his hometown following His sermon in the synagogue there, as we saw in Luke 4:16-30, Jesus left town and went to Capernaum.

Capernaum is about 20 miles from Nazareth. It is on the northwest shore of the Sea of Galilee. A bustling fishing town with a population of around 1,500 at the time of Jesus, Capernaum was the hometown of Simon Peter, Andrew, James, and John, who all made their living as fishermen before Jesus called them to leave their nets and follow Him. If you go to Capernaum today, you can eat (as we did) at St. Peter's Restaurant, which features "St.

Peter's fish" on its menu. In case you're wondering, "St. Peter's fish" is actually tilapia. Despite its name, it is unlikely that Peter himself caught any of the fish they serve today!

THE AUTHORITY OF JESUS' TEACHING

So, Jesus came to Capernaum, and the reaction of the people there was markedly different from the reaction He got in Nazareth. The first thing we notice, in verse 32, is that the people of Capernaum "were amazed at His teaching, because His message (*logos*) had authority." There was something different about the teaching of Jesus than what they were used to hearing in their synagogue. *The Message* says: "They [the Capernaum-ites] were surprised and impressed – His teaching was so forthright, so confident, so authoritative, not the quibbling and quoting they were used to" – the way their religious leaders usually taught, which was to quote the opinions of other teachers endlessly without, in many cases, ever coming to a conclusion. As Kent Hughes says, their teachers "were in bondage to quotation marks – they loved to quote authorities" (R. Kent Hughes, *Luke: That You May Know the Truth*, 154). I hope you won't hold this quote or any other in today's message against me!

Matthew points out this same quality of authority in the teaching of Jesus at the end of the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 7:28-29, where he says: "When Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were amazed at His teaching, because He taught as one who had authority, and not as their teachers of the law." *The Message* says it this way: "When Jesus concluded His address, the crowd burst into applause. They had never heard teaching like this. It was apparent that He was living everything He was saying – quite a contrast to their religion teachers! This was the best teaching they had ever heard."

Where did the authority of Jesus come from? It came from God. It came from God the Father, who sent Jesus on His mission to this world. It came from God the Holy Spirit, who anointed Jesus for His mission, and who was present with and at work in and through Jesus at every moment. The authority of Jesus came from the fact that He Himself was God in flesh and blood. Every word He spoke was the word of God. Every act He did was an act of God. When you see Jesus, you are seeing God. When you hear Jesus, you are hearing the voice of God. If you have eyes to see and ears to hear, to really see Him as He is and to really hear Him, you can't help but be amazed, and be moved to bow before Him in surrender and worship.

The authority of Jesus did not come from dead poets or prophets or priests or monarchs or emperors or empires. It came from His true identity – His "true ID" – as the eternal Son of God, the Source of all truth, and the sovereign King of all things. Blessed are those who recognize His true ID and willingly surrender to His sovereign and gracious rule.

THE AUTHORITY OF JESUS OVER DEMONIC SPIRITS

The second thing to notice in this passage is the authority of Jesus over demonic spirits. It comes through loud and clear in verses 33-37 where Jesus encounters a man who was "demonically disturbed" (*MSG*). Literally, what Luke says is that this man had "a spirit of an unclean demon" (verse 33) that affected both his mind and body.

Belief in demons or evil spirits may be controversial or out of fashion today, but there was no question about their existence in New Testament times. There is no question that Jesus recognized their existence and their evil influence. A demon, simply put, is an evil spiritual being who is hostile to God, hostile to people created in God's image, and hostile to God's gracious, redemptive purposes for the created world. Demons, like Satan himself, are fallen angels. They are angelic beings who rebelled against God. They are spiritual beings who joined Satan in his attempt to overthrow God and set himself up as the supreme ruler of the universe. We may go through the normal activities of daily life with little or no awareness of the existence or pernicious activity of demonic spirits, but the Bible reminds us in Ephesians 6 that the most consequential struggles we face in this life are "not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, ... the authorities, ... the powers of this dark world, and ... the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms" (Ephesians 6:12). To fight against these demonic spiritual enemies, we must "put on the full armor of God, so that ... (we) may be able to stand (our) ground, and after (we) have done everything, to stand" (6:13). Spiritual warfare is real. Demonic spirits, who are sworn enemies of God and His people, are real.

Pastor Thabiti Anyabwile (I quoted him last Sunday) says: "A demon is a fallen angel who rebelled with Satan against God and was cast from heaven. Demons are committed to opposing God's rule and everything God does. They hate God and hate God's people. Their entire mission is to resist God. But," he says emphatically, "when Jesus speaks, demons tremble" (Anyabwile, *Christ-Centered Exposition: Exalting Jesus in Luke*, 84).

I also want to share this with you from theologian R.C. Sproul, who points out that some theologians "have dismissed these biblical accounts" of encounters with demons "as being part of the simple superstitious, pre-scientific outlook of first-century people." Sproul cites Rudolf Bultmann, a famous New Testament scholar, as saying "You can't avail yourself of the benefits of modern medicine and technology, and still believe in a world inhabited by demons." The New Testament, though, portrays Jesus casting out demons on multiple occasions. In contrast to Bultmann, whose efforts to "demythologize" the New Testament led him to deny any and all supernatural elements, including the resurrection of Jesus, Sproul quotes Dutch theologian G.C. Berkhouwer, who said: "There can be no theology without a demonology." In other words, you cannot take the ministry of Jesus seriously without taking the existence of demonic spirits seriously. (See Sproul, *A Walk with God: Luke*, 73.)

This healing of the man in the synagogue with an evil spirit – or exorcism – is the first miracle in the Gospel of Luke. The Bible clearly distinguishes between demonic activity and physical illness, though demonic activity may and often does have physical manifestations. In this case, the evil spirit immediately recognized Jesus and shrieked at the top of his lungs: "Leave us alone! What have you to do with us? Jesus – have you come to destroy us? I know who you are – you're the Holy One of God!" (4:33-34)

The reason the demon shouted the name and identity of Jesus was in a futile, desperate attempt to subdue Jesus, to gain power over Him. At that time, many people believed that by knowing and saying the name of a person you could gain power or control over him or her. It was not so. And it is not so.

You may wonder why Jesus would tell this demon (and other demonic spirits on occasions) to shut up and not divulge His true identity as the Son of God and promised Messiah. Why wouldn't Jesus want people to know who He was? He *did* want people to know. But He didn't want them to have wrong ideas about His Messiahship. He didn't want them to fall for false notions of what the Messiah would do. And He certainly didn't want His most vehement enemies, the followers of Satan, to drive the narrative about His identity and mission. He wanted to reveal His identity and the nature of His kingdom on His own terms, not according to the evil intentions of demonic forces devoted to His (and our) destruction.

The inherent power of Jesus over demonic spirits is on display in this merciful act of healing this man with an evil spirit. Just as the people of Capernaum were amazed at the authority of His teaching, so they were amazed at His authority over evil spirits. They said: "What's going on here? He speaks and acts with authority and power." (The word used here for "power" is *dunamis*, from which we get the word "dynamite." There is an explosiveness, an explosive power at work in the words and activity of Jesus in His confrontation with demonic spirits.) The people said: "He orders demonic spirits to get out and they go!" (4:36, adapted from NIV and *MSG*).

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We see the authority of Jesus' teaching. There was something about His words, His manner, His *true identity* that set Him apart from others. Do you remember in John 7, when Jesus showed up in Jerusalem during one of the Jewish feasts and started teaching in the temple courts, the religious leaders in Jerusalem sent the temple police to arrest Jesus, to bring Him in? The police were so moved by the teaching of Jesus that they couldn't bring themselves to arrest Him. When they finally went back to the leaders, the religious leaders said: "Well, where is He? Why didn't you bring Him in?" To which the police answered: "Have you heard the way this man talks? We've never heard anyone speak like He does." (See John 7:32-46.) Jesus spoke – and still speaks – with unrivaled authority.

We also see the authority of Jesus over demonic powers. He didn't have to engage in any kind of spiritual hocus-pocus. He spoke – with authority – and demons obeyed. This unnamed man in the synagogue, and others like him throughout the Gospels, experienced deliverance from the oppression of demonic spirits. They were healed by the grace and power of the Son of God.

THE AUTHORITY OF JESUS OVER ILLNESS AND DISEASE

There is a third thing we see in this passage: We see the power of Jesus over illnesses and diseases of all kinds. After Worship at the synagogue, Jesus goes home with Simon. We know Simon better as Peter, which is the name Jesus gave to him (John 1:42; Mark 3:16). Simon had a mother-in-law (verse 39), which by definition means that Peter was married. His wife isn't mentioned here, but it is logical to presume that Simon Peter lived with his wife and mother-in-law in what was probably a one-room house in Capernaum. Peter's mother-in-law was very sick with a high fever. Luke, a physician by training, says it was not just a run-of-the-mill fever; he calls it a *pureto megalō*, a "great fever." What does Jesus do? He goes to

see her. He tells the fever to leave. And it leaves. Peter's mother-in-law gets up without a moment's hesitation. She knows she has been healed. And she immediately begins to wait on Jesus and their other guests (4:39).

The healing of Peter's mother-in-law, it turns out, was just the prelude, just the opening, before the "main event," which would occur at sunset, when the Sabbath was officially over. People from all over Capernaum brought their sick family members, friends, and neighbors to Jesus. People with all kinds of ailments, with every type of illness – from heart disease to cancer, from tuberculosis (consumption) to diabetes, from pneumonia to MS, from arthritis to kidney disease to anything and everything under the sun, including the blind, the lame, the deaf. Some had to be carried. Some, no doubt, were groaning in pain. Included in the long line of those in need of healing were some who, like the man in the synagogue earlier in the day, were in need of deliverance from demonic oppression.

How did Jesus respond to this immense need? Not only did He demonstrate His authority over sickness and, once again, demonic spirits, He also gave a powerful display of compassion. Warren Wiersbe titled his commentary on Luke 1-13 *Be Compassionate*. Compassionate is what Jesus was. Compassion is what Jesus modeled. Compassion is what Jesus embodied in His ministry on earth. We see that compassion so clearly in verse 40, which says: "When the sun was setting, the people brought to Jesus all who had various kinds of sickness, and *laying His hands on each one, He healed them*" (*italics added*).

See with your own eyes the compassion of Jesus. He took time to give His focused attention to every single person who either came to Him or was brought to Him. He took time to give a personal touch to each one. He laid His hands on every last one who needed His healing touch. He was not too busy. He was not too important. He was not preoccupied with things that were more important (because there was nothing more important to Him that evening). Every person brought to Him that evening felt the touch of His hand.

Compassion can be defined as a sympathetic concern for the suffering, distress, or misfortune of another, together with a sincere desire to alleviate it. If you look up the word in a dictionary, you will see a picture of Jesus. Or you should, because Jesus is the living definition of compassion.

As I think about the way Jesus dealt with all the sick and needy folks who came to Him that evening in Capernaum, what strikes me is not just the power of Jesus to heal – which is real and life-changing – but the loving compassion of Jesus to people who, like us, desperately need His grace.

Jesus showed compassion to all kinds of people in all kinds of situations. And He wants us to do the same in His name.

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THE KINGDOM OF GOD

As usual, there is more to glean from this passage. But we must move on and continue our travels with Jesus. Just one last thing: In verse 43, Jesus mentions “the kingdom of God” for the first time in the Gospel of Luke.

The people of Capernaum knew a good thing when they saw it. They wanted Jesus to stay there permanently. They wanted to hold onto Him. They didn’t want Him to leave.

But Jesus could not fulfill His mission from God if He stayed in Capernaum. He had to take the good news of the kingdom of God to others, to the people who lived in other towns and villages in Galilee and ultimately to Jerusalem. *He had to!* There was a must-ness about His mission, about His proclamation of the coming of God’s kingdom and its meaning, the heart of which is “God’s rule in action” (Leon Morris, *Luke: Tyndale NT Commentaries*, 111).

Unlike the nations of the world, the kingdom of God is not a political entity. It is not a geographical place with national boundaries. It is a spiritual kingdom that exists wherever and whenever people acknowledge the sovereign rule of God and submit their lives to His gracious, loving authority. As Jesus said in Luke 17:20-21, when some Pharisees were grilling Him about when the kingdom of God would come: “The kingdom of God does not come with your careful observation, nor will people say ‘Here it is!’ or ‘There it is!’ for the kingdom of God is within you (and among you).” The kingdom of God is an inside job. It starts in your heart and moves outward from there.

The kingdom of God is present in every heart and life where God rules. I pray that His kingdom is alive and well in your heart and life today.

Lord, let it be so in us, now and always. Amen.