

“Why I Came”

In the name of Jesus, dear friends in Christ: It's the Sabbath day in Capernaum. Jesus was the guest preacher at the synagogue that morning, and the people who heard him were utterly astonished. What first amazed them was his teaching style. When interpreting and applying the Word of God for his hearers, he spoke with absolute authority. They had never heard the like of it. There were used to preachers who read a passage of Scripture and then presented the conflicting opinions of numerous celebrated rabbis from the past: “This guy said this, and that guy said that”, on and on until you had no idea what the passage actually meant or how to apply it in your own life. It was like those in-home Bible studies in which someone reads a verse and then they go around the room giving everyone an opportunity to say what the verse means to them personally. When everyone's had their say, you can take the interpretation you like best. Or rather, take the one that you're most comfortable with, that doesn't challenge your lifestyle or condemn your sin. Jesus didn't teach that way. When he said, “Thus says the Lord” you knew exactly what he meant.

The second thing that astonished the folks sitting in the pews that morning was an exorcism. While Jesus was preaching, a man enslaved by an unclean spirit stood up. And speaking through the man the spirit 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!” Jesus ordered the demon to be silent and to leave the man at once. And that's exactly what happened. The oppressed man was set free. And the congregation sat there in open-mouth and wide-eyed wonder. “What authority he commands! Even the demons obey him!”

For Jesus it's all in a day's work. No big deal. The service completed, he accompanies Peter to his house along with some of the other disciples. It's time for lunch. Let's see what's cooking. No, it's the Sabbath. Nothing's cooking; that would be work. Let's see what's left over from yesterday.

Upon arrival, they discover that Peter's mother-in-law is lying in bed with a high fever. The family is very concerned. Back then a fever could easily be a death sentence. “Is there anything you can do for her Jesus?” Sure, no problem. He takes her by the hand and assists her to her feet. The fever's gone. She feels like a million bucks. Gratefully off she goes to help serve lunch as if she'd never been sick at all.

Jesus and those with him spend the remainder of the day relaxing and chitchatting because that's what faithful Jews do on the Sabbath. They rest. They take it easy. But their little island of tranquility is like the eye of a hurricane. All around Peter's house a great storm is brewing. Word of what Jesus did at the synagogue and then with Peter's mother-in-law is spreading like wildfire from house to house in an ever-expanding circle. Again, it's the Sabbath, so people aren't allowed to leave their homes and go traveling about – that would be counted as work that was prohibited; but no doubt you've seen how they packed houses together in ancient cities, and how you shared walls with the neighbors on every side. You didn't need to leave home to talk to them. So, the word is spreading: the doctor is in, and we know where to find him.

Shortly after sunset there's a knock on the door. The Sabbath is now officially over. And when Peter opens the door he is surprised to discover the entire population of the city

gathered around his house. They cram the streets and alleys on every side. They've brought with them their loved ones who are suffering from every disease, ailment, and injury imaginable. "Excuse me, Peter. Sorry to bother you so late, but is your friend Jesus here? A few of us would like to visit with him."

And so it began: a steady stream of miraculous interventions to relieve human misery in all of its forms. Jesus works long into the night healing, restoring, and freeing from demons until he and those still waiting in the crowd are completely exhausted. The disciples are tired too. They've been doing crowd control and acting as triage nurses, deciding which cases are the most severe and whom to bring to Jesus next. Some folks in the back of the line give up and go home. They figure that Jesus will still be here in the morning. They plan on being the first ones in line then. And then at some point for the sake of his family, Peter cuts it off. Please. No more tonight. My children and my wife need their sleep, and so do the rest of us. Tomorrow will be another day. Come back then. There are cries of protest. "Aw, c'mon Peter! Just one more. Let us see Jesus. Please!" But no such luck. The door closes. The lamps go out. The disappointed go home. But they too plan to be back at first light.

They are destined to be disappointed again. Very early in the predawn, Jesus rises and quietly slips out of the house. He leaves the city and climbs one of the nearby hills that overlook Capernaum and the north shore of the Sea of Galilee. There he prays to his Father in heaven, enjoying with him some of the intimacy that he has known from eternity.

Sometime later, back in Capernaum, the cocks begin to crow. The sun is not yet visible on the horizon and already people are assembling around Peter's house. This crowd is noticeably larger than last evening's because word of the works of Jesus has spread even farther, fueled in part by excited testimonies of the many he healed the night before. There are a lot of returnees too; folks that don't need a healing for themselves or anyone they know, they're just here for the spectacle. They all stand impatiently murmuring among themselves, waiting for sign that someone in the house is stirring. "What's wrong with these people? Are they going to sleep until noon? Can't we get this going?"

At length the weary disciples awake. They peek out of the curtains and see the assembled multitude. They sigh and suppose they will soon begin anew the roles they played the night before. But when they go to rouse Jesus, they discover that he's gone. A frantic manhunt ensues within the house, but the Master is nowhere to be found. "What are we going to tell all those people waiting outside?" Suddenly, one of them who has knowledge of the praying habits of Jesus says, "I think I know where he might be." They slip out of the house one by one and head off in different directions, planning to come together at a designated point of rendezvous. Every time the door opens, the crowd eagerly expects to get a glimpse of Jesus; but each time they are let down. "Is that him? No? Then who cares?"

The disciples meet up at the predetermined place and follow the path up the hill to where Jesus is praying. They are relieved to see him where they thought he might be. "C'mon, Jesus, everyone is looking for you." They expect him to say something like, "Sure, I'll be right down." But no; instead he shocks them by saying, "Let us go on to the next towns, that I may preach there also, for *that* is why I came."

To his disciples this has to sound a bit cold and uncaring. They want to know, "What about all those people standing down there around Peter's house? They want to see you, Jesus. Are you going to just leave them waiting?" That doesn't seem right.

Jesus knows better. It's true that those people want to see Jesus. The question is why do they want to see him. The answer is that they are looking for cures. They want Jesus the healer. They don't want because they don't think they need Jesus the preacher and teacher of divine truth. In this sense they are very much like the crowd present when Jesus later fed the 5000. Afterward they went looking for Jesus too, not because they wanted to listen to him, but only because they hoped that he would feed them again.

In both cases the people were looking for Jesus to give them quick fixes to life's temporal problems. They wanted their symptoms treated. But Jesus did not come to treat symptoms. Jesus came to treat the disease itself. The disease is sin. That's the source of all the other ailments that afflict the body and soul of humankind. Jesus came to get to the root of the problem. And the way he does that is by preaching divine truth with authority: the hard truth of God's holy Law that terrifies consciences and brings sinners to repentance, and the sweet truth of God's love, grace, and mercy in sending his Son to be the Savior – the Savior who would bear all the symptoms, consequences, and just punishments of the sins of all humankind on the cross.

That Jesus, the real Jesus, wasn't nearly as popular with the people of first century Galilee as Jesus the healer. That's evident: only a small percentage of the population of Capernaum was present in the synagogue that Sabbath morning to hear Jesus preach; but the whole city turned out when they heard he was delivering miraculous cures. Well, what about those who were possessed by demons? Weren't they supposed to go to Jesus to be set free? Yes, but how does that happen? The demon in the man in the synagogue was disturbed by the preaching of Jesus. As long as the message of the rabbis interpreting Scripture was wishy-washy maybe this or maybe that, the demon was quite comfortable, feeling no threat. The man he oppressed was held in the bondage by the lies of the devil. What enlightened the man and scared the demon was Jesus teaching the truth of God with authority. And that man, having been enlightened by the truth of Jesus, was inoculated against future demonic attack. The truth taught by Jesus keeps demons out.

Jesus came to preach and to teach the truth that sets people free; free from sin, free from death, and free from the power of the devil. Jesus came to preach the truth that gives life to people in time and eternity. He came to fix the problem itself, not merely to treat the symptoms.

But like the people of first century Capernaum, very often we are not so much interested in that Jesus. You have only to look at the so-called Christian ministries that are the biggest and most popular in our country today. In them you will hear a lot about Jesus the healer, or Jesus the giver of wealth, or Jesus the granter of success, or Jesus the fulfiller of all your worldly hopes and dreams; but you will hear little or nothing about Jesus the Savior from sin. I ask you to consider your own prayers. What do you ask of Jesus when you pray? Are they prayers mostly for growth in his Word, for maturing faith, for the power and guidance of the Holy Spirit, for strength to stand against temptation, for love that serves your neighbors? Or are they mostly for temporal concerns? And please don't understand me. We should bring those temporal cares and needs to Jesus in prayer. He himself taught us to pray, "Give us this day our daily bread." But that's only one of seven petitions in the Lord's Prayer. The other six deal with spiritual matters. Where is your emphasis when you pray? Speaking for myself, it's hardly ever where it should be.

One more question before I close: knowing that Jesus put the emphasis of his ministry on preaching and teaching God's truth with authority, how eager and available are you about

hearing his teaching? The long list of things we ought to be praying for that I rattled off earlier – *those things* God *gives* to people who are listening to and learning the Holy Scriptures being taught with authority. That's how God answers the prayers. It doesn't make any sense, then, to pray for the Holy Spirit, and for growth in Christian faith and living, and all the rest, and then avoid the very means by which God gives what you asked for.

Jesus came to preach and teach God's Word with authority. It's why he came. May he give us the grace to align our priorities with his so that with open ears and open hearts we may always give attention to his holy Word and pray "Speak, O Lord, for your servant listens." In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!