**Text**: Mark 1:21-28

 **The Bethel Pulpit**

 **Pastor Margo R. Martens**

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 312 Wisconsin Ave, Madison WI 53703

“Yet 40 days and Nineveh will be destroyed” ----

“Yet 2 more weeks and we will be in the season of Lent”--

Jonah uttered the first “Yet 40 days” as a prophecy, eons ago.

My 2 weeks notice to you is simply that: a notice that here we are, the 4th week of Epiphany, and in 2 more weeks, as Christians, we begin our repentant observance of Lent: Feb. 18, our first Sunday in Lent. Here we are, 4 weeks into Epiphany and we are still in the 1st chapter of Mark. Even then, on Feb. 18, 6 weeks into the new year, we will STILL be in the 1st chapter of Mark. It’s important to keep track of where we are in the church year.

‘Yet 40 days’, Jonah said. I was surprised and you might be, as well, how that story of Jonah resonated with people last week. I received more than a few e-mails, saying that folk had actually sat down to read that entire book of Jonah. Some wondered what was Nineveh’s wickedness. Some sent me current art work displays of Jonah, here in Madison at the Chazen Art Museum. Some said that they relate very honestly to Jonah, the reluctant and unrepentant prophet from God.

Jonah preached, and that pagan king of Nineveh believed! Quickly! Everyone! People and all creatures! Get down on your knees and say you’re sorry and change your ways! Sackcloth and ashes! Then the king said those amazing words: WHO KNOWS? WHO KNOWS what God might do? God might change God’s mind!

That was last week: God and Jonah and the pagan king of Nineveh, actually recognizing and believing God. This is this week and we are in that first chapter of Mark: we have Jesus in the synagogue, being recognized by the ‘unclean’ spirits. In both stories, it’s the ‘outsiders’ that really recognize the presence

and the power of God.

I’m not so good at talking about demons and/or unclean spirits. I’ve never performed an exorcism. I have never, knowingly, met a person who was demon-possessed. In all that ignorance, I continue to pause and pay attention to these Jesus’ stories about unclean spirits and demon-possession.

Jesus, teaching in the synagogue on the Sabbath…and the congregation is “‘astounded’ at his teaching, for he taught as one having authority and not as the scribes.” What an interesting sentence. When was the last time you were ASTOUNDED here at worship? That is not TOTALLY a rhetorical question. Were the scribes simply boring? Or what? ASTOUNDED at his teaching ! Then this man with an unclean spirit yells at Jesus: “What have you to do with us? Have you come to destroy us?”

The congregation was astounded and amazed at the authority of Jesus. What does that mean?

What kind of authority would astound and amaze you? What kind of authority have you experienced?

This week-end we have Bethel’s annual meeting. Who exercises authority among us? Probably, if Jesus were preaching today, you too would walk away from worship AMAZED AND ASTOUNDED, because Jesus preached with an authority that you have never heard from Pastor Margo.

As we sit and talk together at our meeting, I encourage all of us to think carefully what kind of authority we, as Christians experience with one another, in ALL our dealings together. On our bulletin cover, we are reminded that WE…all of us…make up the church. The quotes on that cover speak about matters that should be considered the most faithful ways that members of congregations work together.

Elizabeth Eaton, our ELCA presiding bishop, gives us good words which I think describe ways of working together, giving us a broad window toward new ways of authority:

“As your church family gathers to make decisions about using the gifts God has entrusted to you, may you remember that by the tender love of God, by the ceaseless pursuit of the Spirit, we are members of the body of Christ. We are family. We share our lives. We love each other. By the reconciling expression of God’s grace, we can live confidently and generously in this community of faith and in service of others because we are joined in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.”

When we are able to live together with such ways of authority, we hear again those words from the pagan king at Nineveh: who knows what God might do among us and in us and through us. Truly, the world might be amazed and astounded!

Now may the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your minds and your hearts in Christ Jesus, our Savior and Lord. Amen.