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## “Don’t be Scammed”

BY PASTOR JOHN HILLMER

*“First things”* - they are so important. Any classroom teacher knows that ‘how you start the year’ sets the pattern, the tone, and the dynamic of the classroom for the year to come. It is wonderful how the four Gospel writers, evangelists Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, each tell us about the beginnings of Jesus’ ministry with such variety and with such personal insight. The ‘arc’ is the same – but the nuances are wonderfully captivating.

**Matthew** tells us of the ‘birth’, the coming of the Magi (3 Kings), the “flight into Egypt” and Jesus’ return to Nazareth. Then Matthew fast forwards to when he is baptized, the Temptation, and he calls the disciples. By chapter 5, he’s up the on the mountain, teaching “The Sermon on the Mount”. His **first activity** is to teach. Unmistakably, “The Rabbi”.

**Mark** speaks not a word about the birth of Jesus. He jumps right into the wilderness and Jesus is baptized. This is quickly followed by the temptation and then he calls the disciples. Then is our readings today, into the Synagogue in Capernaum he goes, and he silences an unclean spirit. Expels him! Kicks him right out! His **first activity** is to silence vile, alien and oppressive voices.

**Luke** gives us the most beloved birth story of all time – Mary and Elizabeth, and shepherds and angels. Mary & Joseph bring him to the Temple. Then a quick jump across time, he’s baptized and then the Temptation, (just like the other 2 Gospels); and

he calls the 12. Then he goes to the synagogue in Nazareth where he is "lector for the day" - he reads from Isaiah the prophet

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me. He has anointed me to bring good news to the poor; to proclaim release to the captive; give sight to the blind and let the OPPRESSED GO FREE." TODAY, this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing!

and they ran him out of town, trying to stone him. His **first activity** is to proclaim good news to the poor, justice, and freedom to the oppressed.

**John** tells us he is baptized, meets up with John the Baptist, calls a few disciples; and then goes to a party! Yes – the **1<sup>st</sup> thing** he does is go to a wedding and turns water into wine. "First things"?

**Matthew** - a teacher. "Rabbi" on the mountain.

**Mark** - power and authority to call out the vile and the avenger.

**Luke** - a short sermon (proclamation) that turns the whole congregation against him.

**John** – a wedding party, and a wonder! He enters the fabric of human life/society.

The 'first action' sets the stage.

God stands steadfastly against all those forces that are keeping them down! God is opposed to anything and everything that robs them of abundant life! God is prepared to do battle with those who seek to rob them of lives of joy, meaning, and purpose!

Notice that the very first thing Jesus does in Mark's Gospel is cast out an unclean spirit. We don't always know exactly how to process "unclean spirit" in modern terms.

First thing Jesus does is free this man from the hold of his unclean spirit and restore him to himself, his loved ones, and his community. The very first thing.

First things matter. Mark could have told his story about Jesus differently and began by reporting some other action of Jesus. After all, Matthew, Luke, and John all did! Instead the first thing Mark reports gives us a sense as to what the Evangelist thinks is most important. It even offers a pretty strong clue to what he believes is the heart of Jesus' ministry and mission. Which is why it's important to note that the first thing Jesus does is free a man from an unclean spirit that robs him, his family, and his community of life. Jesus "sets him free" and then surrounds him with love. He wraps him in compassion and care.

God is against anything that robs **us** of abundant life. God is also against forces that rob *any of God's children* of the life God - making that manifest in Jesus!

**"Don't be scammed by other sinister, yet convincing, voices we hear in the world."**

So how can we be about the business together of diminishing the things that rob us, our neighbors, and communities of life? How can we be truly counter to the unclean voices and not let all decision-making processes and discussions get reduced to political conversations held on the binary (us vs. them) terms of a culture that feeds on outrageous words and actions?

That's where our faith meets the road. Faith in God. Listen! **Open yourself to God's Word.**

**As to "other" words... Don't be scammed!**

Amen.