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Mark 1:21-28

January 28, 2024

**Mark 1:21-28**

***21They went to Capernaum; and when the sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught. 22They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes. 23Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, 24and he 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.” 25But Jesus rebuked him, saying, “Be silent, and come out of him!” 26And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him. 27They were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, “What is this? A new teaching—with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him.” 28At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.***

The gospel of Mark moves fast. In just the first 20 lines, listen to all that has happened. First, John the Baptist comes out of the wilderness proclaiming the Messiah is coming, he baptizes Jesus, Jesus is immediately sent into the wilderness for 40 days. Then we jumped way ahead to when John the Baptist is arrested, Jesus announces that the kingdom of God has come, he calls his first disciples, and they start out by going to Capernaum. 20 lines. Mark moves fast and with some urgency.

There in Capernaum Jesus and his newly called disciples went to the synagogue when the sabbath came, and Jesus taught. Not only did he teach, but he was different than the scribes that the people were used to. Jesus taught them with a kind of authority that the people were not used to. You know what that’s like. Look back to the best teachers you’ve ever had. Wasn’t there something about them that stood out? Maybe it was clear immediately that they knew their subject; they knew how to teach with enough energy to keep your interest; they drew you in by keeping you curious perhaps. Wouldn’t it have been awesome to be in the synagogue that first time people heard Jesus teach?

As if to drive home *just how much* authority Jesus had, Mark next presents us with a man possessed by a demon – a man with an unclean spirit. The Greek term used for unclean spirit is the same term used in the fifth chapter of Mark, when Jesus ordered the demons out of the body of the man from Gerasene, and *into* the bodies of the swine, who then jumped off of the edge of a cliff, destroying the demons along with the swine. The story of the Gerasene demoniac.

In the synagogue in Capernaum the man possessed 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!”

This was no ordinary heckler.

I had an experience back when I was considering whether I might go to seminary someday. I went to a weekend at a seminary where people from all over who were considering seminary someday, came together to see what seminary might be about. There were probably about 40 of us in the group that weekend. We experienced some classes, went on tours, had some special events. There was a woman in our group who had Tourette Syndrome, a neurological disorder characterized by uncontrollable movements or sounds. Her particular manifestation of Tourettes was an uncontrollable shouting of profanity. I imagine that in another day and age, this woman would have been considered possessed by a demon.

Jesus not only taught as one who had authority, but he had *so much* authority that even the demons inside that man obeyed Jesus’ command to be silent and leave the man. In just these few lines from the gospel of Mark today, Jesus presence became clear. Exorcising this demon was a powerful thing to witness.

We don’t talk much about demons in this day and age. We have explanations for things, we know stuff, we can explain everything, we have psychiatry and psychology and sociology. Hearing and obeying words from unseen mysterious spiritual sources is suspect. Just this week, the news told of a pastor in Colorado who was arrested for scamming $3 million from congregants using fake bitcoin. He said God told him to do it, but then explained that “maybe I misunderstood.” When it comes to demons, we are so over it.

And yet, here are some disturbing things that come to mind in these times that we are in:

* Yesterday was Holocaust Remembrance Day, marking the anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau.
* The death toll in Gaza now over 26,000.
* The State of Alabama is now the first state to employ yet another way to kill a prisoner, using nitrous oxide for the first time.
* Every day, 22 military veterans die by suicide.1
* Our country is more divided than ever, stoked by fear and misinformation and distrust, leading to behaviors and decisions that separate, not unite; that lead to harm and not well-being.

So maybe we *should* talk about demons….What kind of demons exist in societies where these kinds of pain are allowed to continue?

I don’t have a lot to say about *individuals* being possessed by demons. A May article in *Presbyterian Outlook* about Russell Crowe’s new supernatural horror film "The Pope’s Exorcist" says that “Exorcism has been a prominent rite of the Christian faith since its inception. During the first few centuries exorcism could be performed by all believers and it played an [important role](https://www.google.com.au/books/edition/_/nkgWDAAAQBAJ?hl=en&gbpv=0) in attracting outsiders to the burgeoning faith.”3 Belief in demon possession and exorcism has waxed and waned in the many years since then.

Our denomination doesn’t emphasize the demonic possession of individuals. In a statement from the PCUSA Mission Agency, we read, “When New Testament authors tried to explain why things happen as they do, they often referred to unseen forces at work in the world. Terms they used for these forces included “principalities,” “powers,” “authorities,” “rulers,” “kings,” “angels,” “demons,” “spirits,” “thrones” and “dominions.” They applied the terms sometimes to *heavenly or spiritual realities*, sometimes to *earthly officeholders or structures of power*, and often to both at once.”4  Demons are only one word among many that seek to describe or define this intangible source of radical evil in the world. And they affect systems and structures of power too. Our text today tells us that Jesus’ power to rule over the demon, is about Jesus’ power to set us free. Free from whatever our demons might be.

Not just the demons of bad habits or temptation. I’m thinking of the demons of hopelessness, dread, fear, pride, cynicism. These demons tempt us into thinking that we will never be disappointed or hurt again. If we never hope we will never be disappointed. If we are held captive by our fear we will never have to change. If we let cynicism rule our imaginations shrink.

The gospel of Mark is all about getting to work making the power of God evident in the world. Today’s text invites us to ask, What would happen if we actually believed that Christ had the power to set us free? Free *from* something in order to be free *for* something.

We would take more risks – we would connect with strangers, we would be curious about others, we would risk trusting another, we would explore other perspectives, we would fail more because we tried more, we would be brave, we would love more, we would imagine wider, and hurt each other less.

Rev. Matt Skinner, writes this: “…the reign of God does not take up residence in a world that waits patiently or makes room for it. In order to take hold and become a real, new state of affairs, God’s reign must dislodge forces that few of us consciously *chose* to swear allegiance to.” The fast pace of Mark’s gospel risks leading us to believe that freedom from what harms us also happens at a fast pace because God is that powerful. Skinner writes, “We can talk about God’s power all we want, but we dare not fool ourselves into embracing a simplistic solution that underestimates either the persistence of struggle or the anguish that we suffer and inflict on one another.” (Rev. Matt Skinner, Westminster Presbyterian Church, Minneapolis, January 2021)4

The Good News has always been a radical enterprise. There is nothing simplistic about it. But like the moral arc of the universe that is long and bends toward justice5, we are in this race for the long haul. The more we lean into the power of Christ to set us free, the more we are able to actually have an effect on the systems and structures that we are a part of. There will be nothing to hold us back.

Let’s pray…

1 In my studio artist collective, there is a gentleman doing a show in May, hoping to bring not just awareness, but action, to the fact that 22 Veterans die by suicide each day. *(“Trigger Warning: Uncover, Scrutinize, Act”* May 18, 1-7 opening reception, SIY Gallery, inside Tanforan, outside of Target’s second floor. The artist “BigC” (Colin Hoffman) will be available in Siy Gallery from 1-4 on Tuesdays and Thursdays.) @bigccreates bigcisme.com

2<https://www.nytimes.com/2024/01/23/us/colorado-pastor-crypto-fraud-eli-regalado.html>

3<https://pres-outlook.org/2023/05/gabriele-amorth-conducted-over-60000-exorcisms-and-believed-hitler-was-possessed-meet-the-man-who-inspired-the-popes-exorcist/>

4<https://www.westminstermpls.org/confronting-our-demons/>

5When Dr. Martin Luther King said "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice." A number of listeners pointed out that King was in fact echoing the words of 19th century abolitionist and Unitarian minister Theodore Parker. <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=129609461>

Other reading:

* <https://time.com/6329407/obsession-with-demons-essay/>
* <https://www.washingtonpost.com/posteverything/wp/2016/07/01/as-a-psychiatrist-i-diagnose-mental-illness-and-sometimes-demonic-possession/>