

January 28, 2024
Fourth Sunday after Epiphany, Year B
Grace Church, Muncie
The Rev. Dr. Paul Jacobson, *Rector*

Deuteronomy 18:15-20

Psalms 111

1 Corinthians 8:1-13

Mark 1:21-28

Grace and peace to you from God our Father,
and from the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Last week, I mentioned that the word “immediately” serves as a thumbnail for St. Mark’s gospel account. In our reading of Mark thus far, we’ve seen the proclamation of John the Baptist, the baptism of Jesus, one verse on the temptation in the wilderness, Jesus’ first, short, sermon, and the calling of the first four disciples. All of that occurs in just twenty verses. Immediately, indeed.

So, today, we have Mark’s account of the beginning of Jesus’ public ministry – in a synagogue in Capernaum. Those of us who sat with Steve Holdzkom last November for his wonderful exploration of Mark were reminded that Capernaum, a fishing village on the northwest end of the Sea of Galilee, served as a sort of home base for Jesus’ ministry.

The writers of the four gospels each introduce Jesus in a different light. The Jesus of Matthew and Luke is a teacher, John’s Jesus is a worker of signs. The Jesus that Mark introduces to us today is a healer, a caster-outer of demons and unclean spirits.

Well, yippee, right? Who doesn’t just love an exorcism story? We might be tempted to pass it over as a colorful but irrelevant tale from ancient times, or a story that’s told in another part of town. But this is the first thing Mark wants us to know about Jesus’ public ministry, so it requires our attention, even if it leaves us with questions.

Let’s step into the story ... True to form, Mark cuts to the chase. *When the sabbath came, Jesus entered the synagogue and taught.* Every time I read this passage, I find myself wondering what it was that he said, how he opened the Scriptures to them. Mark doesn’t seem to be interested in the content of Jesus’ teaching, but whatever it was that Jesus said, we know that it had a profound effect: *They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes.*

In a typical rabbinical style, the teacher would discuss all the commentaries on a text – something like, “Rabbi Gamaliel said this, and Rabbi Moses says that, but Rabbi Simon says this other thing.” Finally, the teacher would conclude with his own

viewpoint. Mark wants us to know that Jesus didn't do that. He didn't rely on the authority of the teaching tradition. He taught with personal authority.

Although we have no access to what Jesus said that day, we do know that it got peoples' attention. The crowd was astounded. Here's another place of wondering for me. I grew up in a tradition that universally disparaged "the scribes." Looking back, I wonder if it was a permissible code for anti-Semitism.

But my years on the organ bench and in the pulpit have given me more compassion for the scribes. There they were, week in and week out, serving as custodians of the people's legal and prophetic tradition. It's hard for me to imagine them as a nefarious, self-seeking cohort of bad-faith actors.

On that Sabbath day, I can imagine them being astounded, but probably not elated. All those years in scribe school count for nothing when one rube with charisma comes along with none of the credentials, preparation, or any of the normal markers of "one having authority"!¹

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In the synagogue that Sabbath there was also a man with (or in) an unclean spirit – and that spirit was not picking up what Jesus was laying down that day.

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. Well, that kind of outburst makes everyone a little uncomfortable -- in Capernaum or in Muncie.

According to Mark's account, this man had no voice of his own — the spirit spoke for him. The man had no control over his body — the spirit convulsed him. We might also suppose that the man had no community — the spirit isolated him. And the man had no dignity — the spirit dehumanized him.

This portrait of "possession" might sound extreme, and maybe you can't relate to its details. But I think all of us suffer, or have suffered, the bondage of "spirits" that diminish, distort, or wound us.

Afflicting both individuals and societies, these spirits are unclean because they oppose God, and what God desires for us. Rather than bless, they curse; rather than build up, they tear down; rather than encourage, they disparage; rather than promote love, they sow hate; rather than draw us together, they seek to split us apart.

¹ Benjamin J. Dueholm in the January 2024 issue of *The Christian Century*.

It doesn't much matter if you see these forces as spiritual, psychological, biological, metaphorical, or cultural, this Gospel story shows us how unclean spirits affect and manipulate our souls.

In Mark's story, the unclean spirit goes to the synagogue and listens to Jesus. It recognizes "the Holy One of God" before anyone else does – this is a common theme in Mark. The spirit calculates the odds, realizes that Jesus's presence signals its doom, and puts up a vicious fight before it surrenders.

Does any of this sound familiar? When we are living in an unclean spirit, it goes everywhere with us – into our friendships, into our families, even into church, and beyond. But when that spirit encounters Jesus, they recognize him immediately. They know an encounter with him will change everything, so they make us recoil as soon as Jesus shows up in the guise of a loving friend, or a provocative sermon, even a state trooper.

It is a paradox, but sometimes our lives actually get *harder* when we move towards faith and healing, because unclean spirits always fight the hardest when their time is up.

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I want to come back around to authority. I wonder how those people in Capernaum experienced Jesus' authority that day. Maybe he had a compelling sense of integrity. After all, he didn't seem to be in the business of puffing himself up, or consolidating power, or even starting a movement. Instead, he used his authority to heal.

In that healing, Jesus stepped directly into the path of that unclean spirit, with all its venom and rage. He didn't flinch. He didn't seek to keep his hands clean. Mark's Jesus has his sleeves rolled up, ready to confront and engage anything that compromised or diminished the life and spirit of those he loved.

He preached with great effectiveness to the faithful. He also spoke the unclean spirit's language, listened to its cries, rebuked it for the sake of a broken man's health and sanity, and sent it packing.

This story leaves many open questions, but when we think about the question the spirit asks, "What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth?" there really is only one answer. "Everything. I have *everything* to do with you." Wherever pain is, wherever

darkness is, wherever torment is, God is. God has everything to do with you, even, maybe especially, when you're at your worst.²

What possesses you? What wreaks havoc in your heart and mind? What distorts your humanity? These forces might not leave your life without a fight, but I have it on good authority that the Jesus of Mark's gospel will do battle for you if you will let him. Will you? Let him. Amen.

² Thank you, Debie Thomas, <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/essays/1628-the-exorcist-in-the-synagogue>