

Waking Up the Demons

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Mark 1:21-28

21 They went to Capernaum; and when the sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught. 22 They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes.

23 Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, 24 and 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."

25 But Jesus rebuked him, saying, "Be silent, and come out of him!" 26 And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him.

27 They 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."

28 At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.

AUTHORITY

Demons can sleep through most sermons.

But, when Jesus preached the demons woke up.

What made the difference? It was a matter of authority. Jesus preached with authority.

John Killinger tells of the days when news of the old country was carried to America only by ships. When a mast was sighted, people would assemble on the dock.

The moment the gangplank was thrown up and sailors began to disembark, hands would stretch out and cries would go up from the crowd. Everyone was desperate to know,

“Is there any word?”

Killinger wrote, “And I can testify, as one who has gone to church with the masses of modern men and women who feel isolated, cut off from community, lost in the wasteland of electronics and gadgetry that we enter the sanctuary with the same plea:

‘Is there any word?’”

The image of news starved pioneers, stretching their hands up to the sailors as they crossed the gangplank is a good image to describe the congregation that listened to Jesus in Capernaum.

They longed for a prophet like Moses. Moses not only brought a word from God; Moses also stretched out his hand and the waters of the sea parted.

But, be careful what you wish for. The authoritative word can also be a frightening word.

The people said that unlike the scribes, Jesus taught as one having authority. I used to think that was a compliment, but now I’m not so sure. The NRSV translates verse 22, “They were astounded at his teaching ...”

But, that word translated “astounded” can also mean, “strike with panic” or “shock.” I wonder if that might be the better translation.

If that were true the translation would now be,

“They were shocked by his teaching...”

“They were panic stricken by his teaching...”

WHAT HAVE YOU TO DO WITH US, JESUS?

I think the question voiced by the demon-possessed man may have expressed the general feeling of everyone in the synagogue. “What have you to do with us, Jesus?”

The preaching of Jesus is not business as usual. His preaching interrupts and in some ways threatens the religious establishment.

And, by the way, I think his preaching still threatens the sensibility of many people.

Did you see the work of art that the First Presbyterian Church of Orlando purchased?

It's a very lifelike statue of a homeless person lying on a bench. But, when you look closely the homeless person has nail-scarred feet.

That's the clue that person portrayed in this statue is Jesus.

But, some people are adamantly opposed to this work of art. This doesn't fit in with their idea of who Jesus was and what he came to do.

But, of course the artist took his cue from the Bible and in particular the 25th chapter of Matthew. In that passage Jesus actually said we would find his hidden presence when we serve those who are homeless and helpless.

Many people are shocked when they hear that message. The Messiah who comes is still not the Messiah we expected.

IMMEDIATELY

In our lesson for today, the translators take out Mark's favorite word, "immediately" to smooth out the translation. I think that's a mistake.

It's not a matter of style but a matter of urgency. We talked about this last week. Mark's gospel is the gospel of shock and awe. In Mark's gospel the ministry of Jesus is like a runaway train.

Jesus is baptized and *immediately* the Spirit drives him into the desert to be tempted by the devil.

When Jesus comes out of the wilderness of temptation, *immediately* he begins preaching that the kingdom of God is near.

He calls disciples to follow him and *immediately* they drop everything and follow him.

And in our lesson for today a literal translation of verse 21 is: "... *immediately* when the Sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught."

In my mind this use of the word immediately makes it sound like Jesus came in and took over the service.

The ministry of Jesus caused people to ask, "Who is this guy? What's going on here?" The ministry of Jesus prompted amazement, awe, fear and even panic.

And I think if we really hear the message of Jesus it might provoke the same response in us.

HAVE YOU COME TO DESTROY US?

Let's face it. When most people hear the word sermon they think of a boring moralistic talking-to.

But, Jesus didn't preach like the scribes ... or even the Presbyterians and the Methodists for that matter. He preached with authority.

When Jesus preached the demons woke up and the normally staid service was punctuated by the shriek of a man with an unclean spirit. He asked,

"What have you to do with us, Jesus?
Have you come to destroy us?"

Mark tells us from the very beginning.
Jesus was the Son of God.
He came preaching good news.

But, it didn't seem like good news to everyone.
His preaching brought out the demons, even in a holy place like the synagogue.

And I wonder if a face-to-face encounter with Jesus might bring out the demons in us as well.

AN UNCLEAN SPIRIT

The Bible says that the man had an unclean spirit. What does that mean?

I believe this man was possessed by the demons named sin and guilt. When he came face to face with the holy one of God, his first thought was that the holy one had come to destroy him.

This has often been the response of men and women in the presence of the holy. For example when the prophet Isaiah encountered God in the temple he said,

“Woe is me for I am a man of unclean lips and I live among a people of unclean lips.”

The presence of God brings out the demons in all of us. In our guilt-ridden conscience, we may even think that God is out to get us.

But, of course that’s just not so.
Just the opposite is true.
God’s out to save us.

And yet, the process of salvation can be messy and even painful. We see that in the healing that took place in our lesson for today.

Jesus commanded the unclean spirit to shut up and come out of the demon-possessed man. “And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him.”

He was healed, but healing did not come easily.

Demons do not leave us without a fight.

CASTING OUT OUR UNCLEAN SPIRITS

The demon-possessed man asked Jesus, “What do you want with us Jesus?”

And some days we ask the same question.

Some days we are just like that man with the unclean spirit. We don't understand why we do the things that we do. We feel like we are controlled by events and emotions that are out of our control.

And the presence of Jesus convicts us of our sin. In our misery we just want to be left alone. What do you want with us Jesus?

But, Jesus loves us too much to leave us alone.

Just as Jesus silenced the unclean spirits in the demon-possessed man, Jesus silences the unclean spirits in our lives.

Jesus casts aside those things that bind and constrict us. And by the astounding power of grace God in Christ calls us to new life.

Edwin Friedman was a psychologist and a Jewish rabbi. He specialized in working with religious groups that were dysfunctional. In fact he often worked with Christian ministers who were leading troubled congregations.

One of the techniques Friedman used was to challenge the faulty assumptions of these troubled congregations in a direct and even playful way. The idea is to honestly confront irrational behavior while staying calm and connected to the people you serve.

Of course when you confront the "we've always done it this way" attitude you can get some significant pushback. It takes courage and a strong sense of self to act this way.

But, many of the ministers that Friedman worked with didn't have this attitude. In fact, some of the ministers even suggested that to confront bad behavior in such a direct way would be unchristian.

And Friedman with a twinkle in his eye would say that as a Jew he certainly wasn't an expert in the New Testament.

But it seemed to him that more than half the stories about Jesus told of a man who challenged people and systems that were dysfunctional.

NAMING THE DEMON

Some people suggest that we should pour oil on troubled waters. In other words we should try to focus on the positive and avoid those things that trouble us. But, that can be a dangerous strategy because I have found that someone is always ready to light a match.

The best way to exorcise a demon is to name it. The best way to exorcise a demon is to frankly describe what is going on and ask others to do the same thing.

Evil loves to hide in the shadows of secrecy and keep us captive to the thing we dare not name.

But, Jesus brought the light of God to bear on the evil within.

Jesus named the demons that were plaguing the man and the place of worship. His preaching brought the demons out into the open where he could deal with them once and for all.

Unlike us, Jesus didn't avoid conflict. Jesus didn't avoid the demons that lurked in the holy place.

Jesus challenged the demons. Jesus told them to shut up. And then he cast them out in order to bring healing.

THE KINGDOM OF CONFRONTATION

We are not the people we are called to be. The holy places in our lives have been invaded by unhealthy desires and patterns of behavior that are destructive.

In a word, there are demons that need to be confronted in all of us.

Jesus saw the interruption of a demon-possessed man as an opportunity to teach with authority. He did more than heal one man that day. He taught everyone a profound lesson about the kingdom of God.

The kingdom of God begins with confrontation. The kingdom of God begins by talking about things we would rather not talk about.

Let me give you an example of how this might work today. One of the Super Bowl ads that many of you will see this evening is about domestic abuse.

In that ad a woman calls 911 to order a pizza. The operator says, "This is 911, an emergency line." The lady continues by saying something like, "I would like pepperoni and double cheese."

At this point the operator gets the idea. He asks, "Are you in danger? Is someone in the room with you? Just say yes if that's true."

And the lady responds, "Yes, that's right." The operator contacts a policeman who is nearby and the woman is saved from the situation.

This subtle but effective commercial gets the conversation going. In many cases we do not talk about domestic abuse. We blame the victim or say that it's not that bad.

In days gone by ministers would even counsel women to stay in bad marriages.

In order to break that demonic cycle we have to name the demon. We have to bring what is hidden out into the open and deal with it honestly.

Only after having this difficult conversation in public are we able to break the cycle of abuse.

CONFRONTING OUR DEMONS

When I took my first course in abnormal psychology the professor warned us that we would recognize ourselves in many of the descriptions of people who were mentally unbalanced.

He said that we shouldn't be alarmed. Mental health isn't a matter of kind. It's a matter of degree.

In other words all of us are dysfunctional in some way. All of us have our own kind of craziness, our own demons. And all of us need someone who has the authority to command the evil in our lives to leave.

Jesus has that kind of that kind of authority. Jesus has the courage to confront those things in our lives and in our world that need to change.

As someone once put it, Jesus not only comes to comfort the afflicted; he also comes to afflict the comfortable.

Jesus comes to challenge the old way of life. Jesus tells the demons that control us to take a hike.

Oddly enough in our story for today the only one who recognizes Jesus is a demon. The demon says, "I know who you are, the Holy One of God."

The demon had the right name, but the demon did not really understand what the name meant. And many who use the name of Jesus today do not really understand Jesus either.

Jesus does not come to be controlled by our agenda and our idea of what is holy. Jesus comes to bring the kingdom of God near and in so doing he sometimes challenges what we regard to be most holy.

Today we take the Lord's Supper and we remember once again the price of confronting evil. It is the price of body broken and blood shed.

The demons of this world do not come out easily. But, we know that they will come out. This story ends with forgiveness and resurrection. This story ends with salvation and new life.

And so today we take communion to remember. The Spirit of God in Christ still comes with a word of hope and authority. God help us hear that word today.

Amen.