

“Who is This Guy?”

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Mark 1:21-28

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.

A DISORDERLY WORSHIP SERVICE

I’ll admit it.

Most Sunday worship services are pretty predictable.

A call to worship, a prayer of confession,
a children’s sermon, an anthem, a sermon and three hymns.

We know what to expect.
And most of us like it that way.

We're Presbyterians.
Decently and in order.
The best surprise is no surprise.

But, when Jesus came to worship in the synagogue, decently and in order
went out the window.

First, there was the sermon.

It wasn't a sermon about God.
It was a sermon that spoke for God.
It was a teaching with authority.

When Jesus spoke, people heard something new.
Hearts burned.
Heads turned.

It was unlike anything they had ever witnessed before.

But, the second surprise was even more startling.
There is an exorcism right in the middle of the service.

Can you imagine someone standing up in one of our services and shouting?

Of course not,
...not allowed.

It might not be in the Book of Order, but we all understand.

No exorcisms in the middle of a Presbyterian service... or at any other time
for that matter!

But, that's exactly what happened in the synagogue the day.

A demon possessed man shouted,

“Why are you here Jesus of Nazareth?
Have you come to destroy us?
We know who you are.
You are the Holy One of God.”

Jesus rebuked the unclean Spirit,
“Be quiet and come out of him.”

And the man went into a convulsion,
cried out in a loud voice,
... and the demon came out of him.

Wow.

That doesn't sound like any worship service I've been to.
But, that's what happened when Jesus came to worship.

When Jesus spoke, things happened.

WHO IS THIS GUY?

In Mark's gospel, the authority of Jesus is an important theme.

Jesus says what only God can say.
He speaks with authority.

And Jesus backs up that authoritative speech with authoritative actions.
Jesus does what only God can do.

Heals the sick.
Casts out demons.
Even the wind and the waves obey him.

And when confronted with the authority of Jesus, people want to know,

“Who is this guy?”

No wonder the word about Jesus spread throughout the region.

Jesus was not like the religious leaders of his day.
Jesus is not like the religious leader of our day either.

He teaches with authority,
and even the unclean spirits obey him.

But, we know all that don't we?
We've read these stories many times.

We know who Jesus is.

We know he's the Messiah, the Son of God.
We know that he's Lord of all.
We know that he's the risen one who comes to judge the quick and the dead.

And so its hard for us to understand what it was like for those who first heard Jesus' teaching and witnessed this exorcism.

They didn't know anything about Jesus
... except that he was different from anyone that they had ever seen or heard before.

They didn't experience worship as something decent and in order.

They experienced worship that took their breath away. They experienced worship that left them trembling and in awe.

We, on the other hand, often experience worship with a sense of ho hum.

Part of the problem is that we think we know all there is to know about Jesus.

Our experience of him is relegated to the stories of the past.

But, suppose Jesus came to worship with us this day?

Suppose he spoke an authoritative word to us?
Suppose he confronted face to face the demons in our life and called them out?

If that were to happen, the most important question on our mind would not be:

"Should we have lunch at Fat Boy's today?"

The most important question on our mind would be,

“Who is this guy?”

This would be a worship service that we would never forget!

This experience would be on our minds and our hearts for years to come.
We would talk about it with anyone who would listen.

Maybe this is what we need.
We need an experience.
We need to be touched by Jesus personally.

THE JESUS WE NEVER KNEW

How can this happen? We need to rethink our image of Jesus.

We think that we know who Jesus is and what Jesus comes to do.
And we know some things.
Most of us have studied this message from an early age.

But, there's a part of us that is blind and deaf to the message.

All the gospels portray the religious people as people who are blind and deaf to the message of the gospel. They, of all people, should have known who Jesus was and what he came to do.

And yet, they missed it.

More than that, they even rejected Jesus and the message he brought.

I think that what was true of religious people long ago can also be true of us today.

We can talk about Jesus.
But, sometimes our hearts are far from him.

A while back our adult Sunday School Class read a book entitled, “The Jesus I Never Knew.”

It was a best selling book by the former editor of Christianity Today, Philip Yancey.

He described how the Jesus portrayed in the church of his youth was quite different from the Jesus he later discovered in his study of the Bible.

It wasn't that the church of his youth wanted set out to have a faulty understanding of Jesus.

It was just that culture exerted such a strong influence on their interpretation of Scripture that they were partly blind to who Jesus really was.

It's easy for us to see this problem when it comes to someone else.

We all know about people who use the name of Jesus to do some very UN-Christlike things.

It's easy to see that speck in someone else's eye.

But, it's harder to see the log in our own eye.

Instead of thinking that we totally understand Jesus, maybe we should spend some time with the congregation in Capernaum and ask the same questions that they asked.

What is this new teaching?

What power are we witnessing?

What are these demons that Jesus casts out?

Where do we go from here?

If we aren't amazed and astounded at the teaching of Jesus...

If our worship has become too ho-hum,

too decent and too orderly ...

then maybe its time for us to take another look at Jesus.

If we aren't amazed and astounded at the teaching of Jesus, maybe we're not paying attention to what he's really saying.

Yancey in his book stated the more he studied the life of Christ, the more he could not pigeon hole him.

Jesus is complex.
He is certainly not the one dimensional person we sometimes make him out to be.

For example, he urged obedience to the Mosaic law,
and yet was branded as a lawbreaker by the religious elite.

He could be filled with sympathy for a stranger,
and yet he could also turn to one of his closest disciples and say, "Get behind me Satan".

He often condemned the rich and those who were immoral.
And yet, both the rich and the immoral seemed to be comfortable in his company.

Some days were filled with miracles.
At other times, no miracles were possible because the people did not have faith.
(See *The Jesus I Never Knew*, p. 23)

When we read about Jesus as portrayed in the Bible, we realize that he might be many things.
But, boring and predictable not so much.

I've been reading the Bible for many years.
But, now more than ever the story of Jesus leaves me amazed and somewhat bewildered.
I too ask,

"Who is this guy?"

Don't misunderstand.
It's not that I've lost faith in Jesus.
It's just that I've come to understand that following Jesus is a complex and difficult task.

His passionate human life points us toward what it means to be truly human and truly divine.

And at every turn the portrait painted by the Bible is not the tame portrait of Jesus that resides in our Sunday School rooms.

DEMONS

Just as Jesus turned over the tables of the money lenders;
and drove out those who were selling sacrificial animals in the courtyard;

... so, Jesus come into our lives to overturn what is wrong with us,
and free us from the demons that drag us down.

I know.

Demons? Come on.

Sounds too primitive.

But, I have come to believe that the stories of Jesus defeating demons are some of the most important stories in the Bible.

In a way, those stories are not primitive at all.

Those stories tell the truth

... not only about what happened then

... but also about what is happening today.

In the light of God's presence in the Spirit of Christ,
the demons, the evil in our own life becomes all too apparent. And there is conflict.

When we interpret a story in Scripture,
how we interpret that story is colored by the character with whom we identify.

And most of the time we identify with either Jesus or a character that proves to be faithful

... like say the Good Samaritan.

That way of interpreting the Bible tames the story considerably.

We encourage people to be moral ... to be a Good Samaritan
or follow in the footsteps of Jesus.

But, suppose we're afraid of following Jesus?

Suppose we don't want to be a Good Samaritan because we are worried what it might cost us?

Suppose we're more like the Priest who passes by on the other side or the Prodigal Son?

In that case, the story ceases to be good news and instead becomes good advice.

Instead of salvation we are filled with guilt and shame.

The story is no longer a means of grace.

The story becomes yet another burden to bear.

Or, and maybe this is worse, we use the story to praise ourselves and look down upon those who don't have the strength to follow Jesus and be the Good Samaritan.

I would suggest that when you read the Bible, don't put yourself in the place of the "hero" of the passage.

Identify with the scoundrel.

Identify with the one who doesn't have a clue.

For example, in today's lesson, put yourself in the place of the one who is possessed by demons.

Can you do that?

Do you have demons in your life?

I'll let you in on a secret.

We all have demons in our life.

We keep them well hidden.

But, they're there.

The sermon titles I read these days seem to suggest a message designed to calm our frayed nerves rather than cast out demons. We preach sermons on how to have true peace and live the abundant life.

I would call this the therapeutic school of sermon preaching.

Now it's not all bad.
We want to reach out to those that have no peace.
We want to help those families that are struggling and want a better life.

DO YOU COME TO DESTROY US?

But, the Bible suggests that we need more than financial freedom and personal peace.
Our problems run deeper.
Our problems come from the sin and evil in our life.

And when Jesus comes near, at least at first,
our anxieties will increase instead of decrease.

When Jesus comes near, the demons that we keep hidden deep inside us will come to the surface.

“Who is this guy?”
He's the one who comes to confront and destroy evil.

He loves the sinner, but he hates the sin.

The thing that really turned the worship service upside down in Capernaum that day was not just Jesus' amazing teaching. It was his confrontation with the evil that had remained hidden.

The demons ask, “Have you come to destroy us?”
And Jesus answers, “You better believe it!”

Unclean spirits never come out easy.
The expulsion of this demon is accompanied by a convulsion and a loud cry.
But, evil is no match for the words of Jesus.

Remember.
He says what only God can say.
He does what only God can do.

And that's still true.

The struggle to remove the demons that plague us is in the news each week.

Parents torturing their children for years.

Day after day young women and girls sharing their stories of abuse at the hands of the one who was to give them healing.

Yet another school and town changed forever by gun violence and death. Grief that remains long after the spotlight moves on to the next tragedy.

And that's just this week!

How can people made in the image of God be so cruel?

There's the tendency just to look away

...turn off the TV

...find a distraction.

But, Jesus comes to confront evil, not to run away from it.

Who is this guy, Jesus?

Why did he come here?

He came to challenge and expel the evil that continues to invade our people and our world.

When Jesus said let the little children come unto me it was more than it was more than a cute photo op.

It was a call to protect and support all those "little ones" who are beloved by our Lord.

Instead of turning away our faith gives us the courage to call out the perpetrators of violence and stand with those who have who have been harmed.

The Spirit of God in Christ still casts out demons,

... and brings healing to troubled people.

Oh, it causes quite a commotion.

And some people are not going to like it.

In the Bible, when Jesus casts out demons, some people got really upset.

They begged Jesus to leave.

You see, they were comfortable with the way things were
... even when the way things were
...was demonic and devastating.

It seems that demons can hide deep inside.
We don't recognize the destruction they cause.
We even come to depend on them.

But, God loves us too much to leave us like this.
Into our comfortable and calm worship,
a cry goes up.
It is the cry of the demon possessed as Jesus casts out those unclean spirits.

And we ask,
"Who is this guy?
He's not like the Scribes.
He's not any preacher I've heard or seen."

Indeed.
The Son of God.

We are amazed.

And we say,
"What is this new teaching and how can I follow it?"