

Driving Out Impure Spirits  
Fourth Sunday after Epiphany - Year B - 01/31/2021  
Psalm Reading: 111  
1<sup>st</sup> Reading: Deut. 18:15-20 , 2<sup>nd</sup>: Mark 1:21-28

In the first chapter of the Gospel of Mark we get to see Jesus at the beginning of his ministry. Jesus has been preaching in Galilee, bringing the good news that the “Kingdom has come near.” (Mark 1:15, NIV)

Often the best place for Jesus to preach was in synagogues on the Sabbath day. This was because the synagogue was more a place for learning than a place for ceremonies. Passages of the Torah or the prophets were read and then one or another of the people would stand up to address its meaning in the context of the day. It was a bit like what preachers do today in their sermons, only participation was more wide open. A person who had never been in the building before, with no introduction, could get up and speak.<sup>1</sup> The Apostle Paul would later use the synagogues to help spread the word about Jesus.

So on this particular Sabbath day (which for Jews is a Saturday), Jesus goes into one of the major cities of Galilee, Capernaum, which is right on the shores of the sea of Galilee, and enters the synagogue to preach his message. (v.21) Of course, he has followers, many of whom surely showed up. He has just recruited Simon, Andrew, James, and John along the shoreline while they had been fishing.

So at this meeting when the time comes to remark on the scripture, we can imagine Jesus coming forward to begin

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<sup>1</sup> Barclay, *The Gospel of Mark*, p.22.

speaking to the gathered crowd. He is probably dressed in a linen robe. We assume that he had the long hair and the traditional beard of the time.

Mark tells us that Jesus was an amazing preacher. He must have stood with confidence speaking without notes and reaching into the hearts of most of those who heard him. We know that he impressed the crowd because Mark says that he taught “with authority, not as the teachers of the law.” (v.22)

What does it mean that he taught with authority? Some commentators tell us this might have to do with the preaching style of Jesus. The “teachers of the law” viewed the Bible, in many ways, as a legal document, prescribing precise rules for every situation in life. The Pharisees generally took a very strict and dry approach that seemed to be rather technical, dwelling on the minutia, and recommending behavior that advocated adherence to the letter rather than the spirit of the laws. Meanwhile, Jesus spoke more as a prophet. Telling people what these passages meant for their own lives in the Spirit, what they meant for the nation of Israel.

In the midst of this discourse from Jesus a strange thing happens, (I know this is hard to imagine in a Presbyterian Church where everything is done decently and in order but...) a man rises up, and interrupts, and it is immediately evident to the crowd that by his demeanor and his interruption of Jesus that this is a man possessed by an impure spirit.

Now, I think it is worthwhile to explore what “being possessed by an impure spirit” might mean in the context of that time and place. It could have meant many things. It could have been a simple illness, but more likely it was something

that affected the man's behavior. In the parlance of our day it may have meant that the man had a mental illness or an addiction. In this passage we find out that there is a reaction to Jesus coming in the form of a cry from within the man, but seemingly not from the person himself. The demon, or should I say demons, shouted, "What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are – the Holy One of God!"

Notice that the man shouts, "What do you want with us?" Does that mean there are more than one demons in the man? Or was he just speaking for demons in general? We don't really know. But we do know that the demon feared destruction, and even more, the demon recognized the truth about who Jesus was. This is remarkable when you think about it. The demon recognized who Jesus was before anyone else in the crowd even had an inkling. Yes, this Jesus guy was a great public speaker...he spoke with authority, but they did not yet recognize in him the truth that he was the savior of the world, he was a great person of great power, in fact of power beyond our reckoning.

It is then that Jesus commands the demon to come forth, and the demon does so with convulsions and shrieking. As we can see this creates quite a hubbub in the crowd. Ultimately, because of this episode many people come to Jesus.

I would like to explore a little more deeply this episode between Jesus and the demon. I think we are all constantly beset by demons of a sort. I don't necessarily mean this in a literal way, though I am not ruling it out. I think what people in that day understood as demons are more forces about us and

within us that influence us to act in ways that are not cognizant of our true selves.

I believe we are all born, created, in the image of God. This means that we contain within us a spark of the divine that God breathed into Adam when he formed him from a lump of clay. We are innately good, but we are easily susceptible to stumble and even fall because we also contain within us urges and desires which prompt us to sin. So it is these demons that surround us, seemingly at war with the better angels of our nature that controvert the good within us. After this description, you can see how the ancient Platonists thought that the things of the mind, the forms, our innate being, were good and how things of the body, hunger and desire, were evil or at best a corruption of the higher forms. But I think it is more complicated than this. God gave us both the mind and the body, it is the abuse of either that turns out to be evil, whether a person is abusing themselves or someone else. Our demons are those promptings that push us to do those things, going beyond the pale, so to speak. And we need a higher power, God, to keep us from succumbing to those demons.

For example: I have spoken of my predilection for Klondike bars before. Wait, wait, I know it is hard to imagine this in the current sub-freezing weather. So, how about my predilection for piping hot, fresh from the oven, bread pudding? Well, choose for yourself. These are sweet foods, and while one serving might satisfy hunger, more would send my sugar levels sky high and could literally cause tunnel vision, and dizziness, and an inability to recall words. Even knowing the bad possibilities, I have gone far beyond the limits I set for myself

and ended up regretting it. This is a sign that the little demons have overcome my common sense, causing to tell myself lies about where my limits are.

Now you can imagine far worse scenarios where drugs or alcohol are involved. You can imagine a gambling addiction or behaviors that could involve harming others. These are demons that beset many people. All of us have our temptations, even saintly characters, like Mother Theresa. Just as Jesus expelled the demon from the man in the synagogue in Capernaum, I believe that our faith plays a roll in, if not necessarily expelling our demons, at least helping us to get them under control.

I am sure you have all heard of alcoholics anonymous. One of the most successful programs for dealing with alcoholism. Within it there is a twelve step process. The first step is to accept our powerlessness in the face of addiction, in the face of sin. The second is to come to believe that there is a power greater than ourselves that can help us. The rest of the steps flow from these two. Is this beginning to sound a bit like what happened with the man in the synagogue? The demon recognized Jesus right away! Not that we are the demon, but there is something within us that recognizes our weakness and prompts us to seek and see a higher power. Sometimes it is the sinfulness within us that prompts us to such realizations. If we were perfect, my friends, we would have no need of God, at least we would not think so.

So, Jesus dispels the demon. In this case it seems so simple, but expelling the demons that beset us is anything but simple. In cases of addiction or anxiety or physical difficulties or just not eating that second helping of bread pudding we need

not only to recognize a higher power and to call on that higher power, but to realize that God's work in the world is not simply through some cosmic episode in our mind. God also works through our fellow humans, through therapists, through doctors, through twelve step programs, through friends and family, through an entire apparatus that God has built up around us to help us. And often times, we, you and me, my friends, are an instrument of God's help to one another. We have to realize that without that higher power, working only on our own, we are just too weak to overcome the demons, no matter how great or how small they may be.

Jesus expelled the demon from the afflicted man, and this became one of the hallmarks of the ministry of Jesus. It was one of the things that he was known for. He would expel demons many times as is set down in the gospels.

So as we live out our time in this world, we should understand that we as humans are beset by sin, perhaps brought on by the demons within us. That sin is hurtful to others and to ourselves, and the first step to relieving ourselves of the destructive burden of that sin is through our faith in a higher power, our faith in Jesus Christ.

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