

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.

What Have You to Do with Me? January 28, 2018

You may have heard about the preacher who asked one elderly lady how it was with her soul. "Oh," she replied, "the old devil has been giving me a rough time." Immediately her husband protested. "Now hold on," he said, "she's not too easy to live with herself."

The beginning of Jesus' ministry with an exorcism may be a little difficult for us too. And while it has all the elements of a Steven King novel, there is always more than meets the eye when Jesus goes into action. Today Jesus begins his ministry among the people and he begins somewhat differently in Mark as compared to the other gospels.

In each of the gospels the writer tells us who Jesus is. In Matthew he is a great teacher, in Luke the one who has come to bring release, in John, he is the one who brings life abundant and in Mark he begins with a confrontation with the powers of evil and whoops it good. And sets the overarching theme of the story which is that Jesus overcomes the powers of death and evil and he does so because he loves us.

David Lose commented that "Keeping in mind the importance of first events, we can read this scene as Mark's signal that Jesus has come to oppose all the forces that keep the children of God from the abundant life God desires for all of us. And that message matters because it is still the case: God wants the most for us from this life and stands in opposition to anything that robs us of the joy and community and purpose for which we were created."

And isn't it beautiful that Jesus doesn't shy away from those who approach him with the things that possess them? Can you imagine how weird that moment must have been that morning? Someone in the congregation standing up and have a shouting match with Jesus? Wow. I know some of my friends have had disruptions occur in morning worship but nothing like this.

I wonder what Jesus had been saying? The gospel story fails to give us that information. But maybe Jesus was saying what he said in Luke, that he has come to bring good news to the poor, to set the captives free, to bring sight to the blind, to set the oppressed free, to tell them the time is now, and the kingdom of God is at hand. Perhaps he told them to stop thinking about the text and start doing something about it. Like caring for the poor and the widows, standing up to the powers that be and working for justice and equality, stand with the oppressed and the least of these. Perhaps he reminded them of how much God loves them and cares for them.

Whatever he said it sure got a response, didn't it? "What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? Upset our lives and make us live lives that reflect God's will? I know who you are, the Holy One of God!"

I don't know what I would do if that happened to me in worship. Probably laugh uncomfortably and hope one of the Elders would help that person out the door or somewhere quiet. But Jesus doesn't hesitate. He comes face to face with our personal demons and he casts them out and orders them to be silent. He doesn't look it up in the book of order, he doesn't page through the Bible looking for an answer, he doesn't look to the priest in charge that day, because he knows who he is and he knows who he belongs to, and he knows what he has come for. And that's "what he has to do with us".

He has come to give us life and to stand face to face with all those things that keep us from a right relationship with God. And he speaks with the authority of one who is a prophet of God. One who knows God and listens to His voice. Just like the voice at his baptism and just like Moses who heard and spoke God's word to the people. He spoke with the authority of one who knows God face to face. Who is indeed, God with Us!

I read this story about two men who recited the twenty-third psalm that reminded me of Christ's authority. One was a well-known actor, the other an old and rather unsophisticated minister. The actor's rendering of the psalm was beautiful and commanding. Everyone enjoyed hearing the rich words of the beloved psalm spoken in his clear baritone voice. All the inflections and pauses were perfect. Then the old minister spoke. He stumbled a bit and the words were broken with unnatural punctuations of silence. But when he finished there were tears in the eyes of the listeners. Something had happened, and it was the actor who gave the interpretation: "I know the psalm," he said, "but this man, this man knows the shepherd." That is the difference authority makes. Jesus knows who he is and what the will of God is for him.

Now it would be easy to just think of this as another demon possession story that has given fuel to hundreds of bad movies and books throughout the years. But what if...what if, this story is about you and me. What if you and I are really the possessed person in this story? What if you and I are the ones who get upset with Jesus because he challenges us to let go of what possesses us and be restored to wholeness?

What are the things that possess your life and leave you wrestling with Jesus this morning? Because I don't think the man in our story this morning just wandered in to give Jesus a hard time. I think he was probably just a regular person like you and I carrying a burden of pain that he wasn't sure what to do with until he met Jesus in worship that morning. And when he heard Jesus teaching and saw him face to face it all came out in a rush. And I get that. I do.

Maybe he was a person who had his own personal demons, maybe some hatred or prejudice in his heart? Maybe some addiction that he couldn't shake or maybe some burden that he could no longer carry? Maybe some forgiveness he was unwilling to give to someone, and the longer he carried these things in his heart the unhappier he was. The more they controlled his choices and actions, the deeper his pain. And when he heard the words of Jesus, when he looked him full in the face, he knew. He knew that Jesus knew as well. And then the spirit inside him cried out, "I want to be saved from this, but I don't want to give this up. It is the thing that defines me, it hurts me, but it gives me comfort too, it ruins my life, but it is the only thing I have that I can call my own...Oh, Jesus, what have you to do with us? with me? Have you come to destroy me? I know you who you are!"

And in a powerful moment Jesus grabs him by the shoulders and looks him in the eyes and says, "Be Silent! Come Out! Come Out! Give me that demon that lives within your heart and I will give you rest! I will give you meaning for your life, I will give you the thing you have been searching for all your life! I will give you Living Water, Bread of Life, Rest for your soul, only let..it...go!!!!!!!"

Now I'll bet it was so quiet in that synagogue you could've heard a pin drop on the woven rugs. The people were stunned and amazed. You could probably hear the gasp of breath and maybe even some nervous laughter. And then I would guess rejoicing, though Mark doesn't share that with us, but I imagine the family of that man rejoiced! Just as I remember my mother rejoicing on that Sunday evening, when Jesus won the contest of my heart as I stepped forward to give him all that held me captive while the choir sang, "*I surrender all, I surrender all, All to Thee, my blessed Savior, I surrender all.*" And I'll bet there were tears as well.

None of which is to say that those things miraculously disappeared, or that we don't continue to struggle with the things that possess us and distract us, but only to say that God appears when we least expect him and especially in those place of brokenness or disappointment or fear in our lives. He doesn't shy away from them but comes face to face with our demons and says, "Come out! Come Out!! Let me show you the very best that I have for you. Follow me and let me set you free from the things that separate you from the One who loves you completely." Something we need to do on a daily basis.

Pastor Wendell Debner shared these thoughts in his devotion this week. He says,

"It's Epiphany, the time of the year when the assigned liturgical readings pull back the curtain and show us the Holy One of God. We may have our moments of doubt and we may struggle with demons that bind us, but we can trust that Jesus will be there when we need him. We will not face the demons alone, and Jesus can free us from whatever ties us into knots. He's the real deal, and we can bank on that!"

Jesus invites us this morning to let go of all the things that possess us in ways that rob us of the joy that he wants for us. He reminds us that we are the Beloved of God and that in him we too are new creations. He invites us to then go and share that joy with others reminding them that Jesus is with us in all the moments of our lives, walking with us, talking with us, all along life's narrow way.

What has he to do with us? Well...everything, for those who believe. Thanks be to God. Amen