

*Fourth Sunday after Epiphany*

January 28, 2018

Sermon by Pastor Cindy Bullock

The Holy Gospel according to Saint Mark. (Mark 1: 21-28)

[Jesus and his disciples] went to Capernaum; and when the sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught. They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes. Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, 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." But Jesus rebuked him, saying, "Be silent, and come out of him!" And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him. 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." At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.

The Gospel of our Lord.

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

So I've got to say it is a little strange to be standing here on a beautiful morning in 2018 and talking about unclean spirits and human possessions. I feel like I'm asking you all to believe in a Stephen King novel. It's really not a part of our vocabulary on the way we look at the world these days.

Yes, I know there are cultures that use the language of demonic possession, and who perform exorcisms. This would not be in the ELCA. I did not have exorcism class in seminary. And there is nothing in the pastoral care book between prayers for healing and how to bless a home, or on how to do an exorcism. So I'm feeling a little unqualified to talk about this story of the man with an unclean spirit. So what I'm going to do is just go with what I know.

Here is what I know. I know that there are forces in this world that are not of God; things that block the purposes of God and hurt the people of God. I know that there are forces in this life that leave you and I and others damaged and diminished. And if we want to call those forces "unclean spirits," then we all know about that.

We know about the perfection that drives us to work beyond what's healthy. We know about the forces of insecurity or self-loathing that tell us that we are not good enough.

We know about the prejudices that reduce other human beings to things to be pitied, or used, or demeaned.

We know about the force of fear that makes our lives small in its safety and sameness: fear of not having enough, fear of not being enough, fear of the other.

We know about addictions, and diseases, and obsessions, and grief, and isolation that rob God's children of life.

So, one thing I know is that there are forces, spirits, if you will, that stand between us and God, that keep us from becoming what we were created to be. That's one thing I know.

Another thing I know is that the God we know through Jesus Christ stands against any forces that damage and diminish God's children. Whether those forces act upon us or through us, God will always stand against those things that hurt God's children. God will go to the darkest places, with God's children and for God's children, to stand against the things that take life from us all. And that is central to Jesus' mission and ministry. It is essential that God will stand against these things that are not of God.

How do I know? Because today's scripture reading says so. This calling out of the spirit, this exorcism, is the very first thing that Jesus does in his ministry; the very first thing as he starts out.

In the Gospel of John, Jesus starts with a miracle. In the Gospel of Matthew, he teaches on a mountain. In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus preaches, "*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me.*" But in this, in Mark, Jesus picks a fight with a demon.

In fact, if you read straight through the Gospel of Mark, it becomes apparent that there are a lot of things that Jesus was standing up against: demons, diseases, religious leaders, the empire. The opposition against him starts fast and grows strong. And Jesus will not back down, no matter what. Even in the shadow of the cross, Jesus stands against those things that do not give life. And that tells me that God will not give up on us. God will always stand between God's children and the things that take life from us all.

So the things I know are that there are forces within and around us that take life and possibility. And I know that God stands against those forces. And I know another thing. I know that unclean spirits ask really good questions. At least this one did.

“*What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth?*” asks the spirit. Why are you coming here and messing everything up? Why do you want to come and change things? Couldn’t you just leave things the way they are?

Notice it’s only the demon that speaks. The man is silent in this encounter. He has no voice. The spirit speaks for him. He has no control over his body. The spirit convulses him. He has no community. The spirit isolates him. He has no dignity. The spirit dehumanizes him. There he stands, with no agency, mobility, dignity, from forces too powerful for him to defeat on his own.

We have known this man. We have known those bound by anger, or sorrow, or fear, until they are so self-destructive or they destroy everything around them. We have been this man, so bound by anger, or grief, or fear, or pride, or envy. And the forces that bind are so strong that it’s hard to see anything else. It’s hard to want to change. It’s so tempting to believe it’s fine the way it is. It’s tempting to believe it’s too hard to change things. It takes too much energy to change.

But Jesus isn’t fooled. “*Be silent,*” he says. “*Come out of him.*” This man cannot stay the way he is. None of us can stay the way we are in the presence of the Holy One. That which does not give life must come to an end. The children of God are meant for so much more. God opens us up to the possibilities of joy, and community, and loving purpose.

And it is not easy. When Jesus speaks, this man is convulsed. There is a battle going on within him. It is hard. It hurts. He cries out. Don’t you know we wish for the superhuman Jesus to come and instantly make everything right? To swoop in and destroy all the forces that diminish life, to give us all peace and health and community, in the blink of an eye. To fix us and the world.

But it doesn’t work that way. It is hard to break with the unclean spirits all around us. Jesus will lead us. Jesus will go with us. Jesus will heal us. But it takes time and it takes work. The man struggles. He cries out. And the spirit comes out of him.

So, in summary, here is what I know. I know that there are forces within us and around us that take life and diminish God’s children. I know that God stands against those forces. And I know how tempted we are to keep things just the way they are. That’s what I know.

But there is one thing I don’t know. I don’t know what happens to this man after Jesus heals him. Mark doesn’t say.

What will become of him? Will people still be afraid of him? Will they hold old grudges and be angry with him? Will they nurture him in his new life? Where will he go? What will he do? How will he grow? Will he go home? Will he follow Jesus? Will he become what God created him to be? Mark doesn’t say. This is something I don’t know. But I would like to wonder.

After the resisting, after the convulsive fighting against, after the crying and the wrestling and the silence, I wonder if this man can finally see that he is a beloved child of God, and that God has an amazing future planned for him.

I wonder what beautiful, hopeful possibilities might fill the empty spaces that once housed an unclean spirit.

I wonder what he will become in time.

I wonder if he will tell the story of his life, his pain, his brokenness, and the wonders he discovered through this Holy One, who saw the truth of him and said, "*Be silent, be still.*"

I wonder if he will help others who are broken by the forces that once held him.

I wonder what became of him.

And I wonder what we might become.

I wonder if we can remember that, where there is pain and brokenness, Jesus is there, to give hope, and to help us stand against the forces that are not of God.

I wonder if we know that those forces and chaos can be stilled.

I wonder if we know that we are the beloved children of God, and God will open before us beautiful and hopeful possibilities to fill the empty spaces that once housed our unclean spirits.

I wonder.

Amen.