

Possessed
Collegiate Presbyterian Church
Mark 1:21-28
January 29, 2012

I think you know me well enough that I can tell you a secret about myself now, that I might not have admitted a couple of years ago. The secret is this. I want to run the other direction whenever I see a passage in the Bible about exorcism. It is as if I have become possessed! If there is one kind of biblical story I have trouble dealing with, it is these passages where Jesus drives out some kind of unclean spirit. The miracle stories are hard enough to swallow in a scientific, post-Enlightenment, post-modern, cynical and skeptical world. But exorcism? Really?

I don't suppose it helps me that the most popular movie on the subject had a demon possessed little Linda Blair's head spinning around and her growling like an asthmatic old man. That movie scared me so much that for years I would look under my bed before getting into it to make certain there was nothing under there. In fact, when I was in college there was a slight earthquake in SW Wisconsin while I was studying one day while sitting on my bed. All of a sudden the room was moving, the bed swaying back and forth... You never saw anyone move so fast in your life. I was certain that Satan himself had entered my room and was bound to get me.

So I have a dilemma this morning. Because clearly the text tells the vivid tale of Jesus performing an exorcism. And I have nowhere to run.

Let's look at this lectionary text, and see what we can learn.

To begin with the first chapter of the gospel according to Mark is very compact and action oriented. In a mere 28 sentences, we have the ministry of John the Baptist, the baptism of Jesus, the temptation of Jesus in the wilderness, the arrest of John, the calling of the disciples, and this first episode of teaching and healing in the temple in Capernaum. That's six scenes in 28 sentences. Mark is in a hurry to tell this story. Matthew and Luke take almost 5 chapters to get to this point.

Secondly the most common word in this first chapter is "immediately." In Mark's Gospel, the word "immediately" appears 31 times in only 15 chapters. It is used more than the words faith, hope and love. Mark is not

writing some magnum opus. His writing style is more like a Cliff Notes Gospel.

Mark is telling us that Jesus is a man on a mission. At times we can see Jesus as a teacher, a contemplative, someone who takes the time to listen, but here in Mark's Gospel, Jesus is action-oriented. Our text today bears this out. We read that Jesus amazed people with his teaching, that he taught as one with authority, yet we are not told a single word about *what* he taught. In fact, in the entire Gospel of Mark, there is only one major parable, the parable of the sower. If you want to know *what* Jesus taught, you better read Matthew and Luke. Mark is telling us how Jesus lived and how he died.

While Jesus was teaching, a man with an unclean spirit interrupted the lesson, shouting out, "What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are. You are the Holy One of God." If this happened in our sanctuary, we would all feel a little on edge. I suspect that someone would find a way to get him outside, give him 5 bucks and send him to the Emergency Residence Project and we would go on about our business, even if the outburst might be a topic of some gossipy conversation following the service.

But Jesus saw this as a moment to seize. That man with an unclean spirit understood the import of Jesus better than anyone else in the room. While the man existed on the margins of society and on the margins of sanity, he knew exactly who Jesus was. And he named him, the Holy one of God. Remember that the disciples don't figure it out until Chapter 8, when Peter finally says, "You are the messiah, the one sent by God." This man of unclean spirit was way ahead of everyone, and he wanted to know, "What are you going to do with people like me? Are you going to destroy us?"

But Jesus only said, "Shut up and come out of him!" And then the man convulsed and cried out loudly and the unclean spirit left him.

Even though I am still not ready to embrace exorcism fully, I am impressed. Mark hasn't told us a thing about what Jesus taught, but he has shown us that Jesus has a power over things that people label as unclean.

Mark's point? Precisely that the will and purpose of God present in Jesus engages and fights against the purposes of evil that exist among humanity. Not a battle fought only at the highest levels of government or industry, but

a battle fought right in the midst of common folk like us. The battle of good versus evil, right versus wrong, life versus death happens amidst the people who are gathered for worship. Christ has come to free us from those demons, the ones that rob the children of God of all that God hopes and intends for us.¹

We can all attest to the presence and persistence of evil in our world in various guises. We all know there are forces that are diametrically opposed to God's will. There are forces that rather than bless, they curse; rather than build up, they tear down, rather than encourage, they disparage; rather than promote love, they sow hate; rather than draw us together, they seek to split us apart.²

If we are honest with ourselves, I suspect we could all tell a story of when we have been possessed by an unclean spirit. You know what I mean? There are certainly times that I have been so angry that I have lost control of my senses and said and done things to my family that I truly regret. Had I been full of the grace of God, perhaps that might not have happened. Or that green-eyed monster of envy possessed me and I gladly spoke ill of someone out of sheer jealousy. Possessed again.

And I know I am not alone. Some of you may be able to identify ways you are or have been possessed. Perhaps through addiction to alcohol or other drugs, or to gambling or to pornography. There are those who are captives of hidden demons like workoholism or love of stuff, or deep prejudices that restrict their freedom. Some are possessed by greed. Some demons show themselves in grandiose ways in the love of power or control that harms others.

No, we are not alone in being demon-possessed. Evil runs rampant all around us. And we see its work in the way our economy has been brought to its knees. We see its work in the hallways of our government where gridlock reigns supreme. We see evil at work wherever children are hungry or sexual slavery abounds. We even see evil at work dividing our beloved Presbyterian church.

And sometimes the most terrible evil we do not see. Sometimes evil

¹ Adapted from:

http://bloomingcactus.typepad.com/bloomingcactus/2006/01/mark_12128_what.html

² Adapted from: http://www.workingpreacher.org/dear_wp.aspx?article_id=550

manifests itself in such a subtle way that it is hard to see or to name. Sometimes evil comes to us in the form of indifference or fear. Sometimes evil exists when we fail to act in the face of hatred or injustice. That is perhaps the worst demon-possession of all...self preservation in the face of evil.

Several years ago I saw a play acted by some Christian youth that was meant to tell the good news through a dramatic and musical format. The villain in the play was of course the devil in all his finery, complete with red face and horns and even a tail. He was sinister and nasty and growly voiced. Obviously the character was meant to convey the horrors of evil to the audience. But it bothered me that this villain was so *obvious*. Much of the time evil can be hard to identify, hard to name, manipulative and subtle. Posing as good, but really not good at all. And I suppose that the evil spirit here in Mark is a little that way...fairly obvious. Drawn this way to make the point clear.

The point? There is good news friends. And the good news in this text, demonstrates that Jesus has the power to overcome the forces of evil wherever we may encounter them. Both obvious and subtle.

How does that happen? What does that look like? How is God in Jesus at work healing us, casting out our demons, cleansing us from evil?

Does it happen suddenly like the demon exiting the person in Mark's gospel? Sometimes. Sometimes we stop in our tracks, realize that we need redemption and are re-routed to the path of God.

Other times the route is more circuitous and does not come in a single event. Sometimes the journey to wholeness is a long trudge on a hard road that requires time and good relationships and may involved self-help groups or treatment or prayer or any other way we can find that God is at work to cleanse us.

But in the end, all that does possess us, whether it be one of the seven deadly sins or the most subtle of injustices can be released and cleansed by the power of love we find in Jesus Christ. And we have the power to release that love on the world, by how we embody that love and work alongside Jesus in building the reign of God on earth.