

4th Sunday after Epiphany – January 28, 2018

Mark 1:21-28

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

So, what do we do with a story like this – this story of Jesus casting out an unclean spirit? We're all sophisticated, intelligent, modern people, living in the 21st century. But we are also Christians, who value the word of the Bible. How do we reconcile those two facts about ourselves? Have you ever had a firsthand, supernatural encounter with a spirit, unclean or otherwise? Maybe some of you have. But I suspect most of us haven't. I haven't.

It seems to me that we have three options with this story. First, reject it. It's folklore, a superstitious story with no basis in reality. Unclean spirits don't exist. So this story is simply not true, and we should stop reading it in church as if it were. This was Thomas Jefferson's approach. He famously edited the New Testament to remove all mention of the miraculous and supernatural to make it a book of wise teachings. The second option would be to swing fully in the opposite direction: It's in the Bible so it has to be true in all its particulars. If the Bible talks about unclean spirits, then we must accept that they exist. "God said it, I believe it, that settles it" is how I think the bumper sticker goes. A third option, though, would be to realize that they were living in a different time. And a different place. In a different culture. There's a gap between us and them. They viewed and understood the world in a different way. And so God communicated with them in ways that made sense to them. Let's take the creation story for example. Ancient people understood the sky to be a dome with water above it, so we shouldn't be surprised that the first creation story in Genesis talks about water above the sky. To us that sounds weird. But if the point of that story was that God created the world, and the world as God created it was good, and the people got that message, then there was no reason to challenge their understanding of the atmosphere. There's also no reason for us to accept their worldview when we read the story. Our task is rather to extract the intended message in terms that make it understandable in our context.

As you have probably guessed, I'm going with that last option to tackle this story today. Jesus goes into town after calling his disciples and begins teaching in their synagogue. And the people are kind of freaked out. That's one way to translate the Greek here. They haven't heard anyone teach like him before. What do you suppose he said that got such a reaction? I wish Mark had told us, but he doesn't. I'm going to guess, though, that it was something like what Mark has already told us he said: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news." We've heard this passage so many times that it's hard for us to hear how confrontational Jesus is being. So let's try this. "Times up!" There's a phrase that's been in the news lately. "Times up! God is taking over. Right here and right now. And that means *you* need to change. *You* need to get your act together. You need change your *mind*, your *attitude*, and how you are *living*." How would you react if I, your humble local scribe, started preaching with that kind of forcefulness and specificity – that kind of authority, to use Mark's word? And what if I then got even more specific and said that this is not just personal change that God is calling for, as if we all just needed to go to rehab somewhere. What if I then said we needed to change our whole way of life: our economy, our politics, and even how we entertain ourselves? How long would it be before one of you cried out, "are you trying to destroy us?" Maybe not during the sermon. Maybe you'd wait until after the service. But for sure, someone

would speak up. And what if then I responded by saying, “Shut up!” or “Put a sock in it!” – the Greek word that Jesus uses here means to muzzle, the way you muzzle a dog. I think you’d be calling the bishop if I did that, and then he would certainly pay me a visit to tell me that I can’t talk to people that way. I might even lose my job, especially if I didn’t change my behavior. You begin to appreciate why local scribes don’t tend to speak with such authority – or when they do, they don’t last long.

In this passage, Jesus confronts the possessed man and frees him from the unclean spirit. That man was much like us in one fundamental way. We are all of us, individually – and maybe even more so collectively – subject to forces beyond our control. If we are not possessed by literal supernatural spirits the way the man in the story was, we most certainly partake in and reflect the spirit of our time and place. We embody the attitudes and assumptions of our particular group: our nation, our ethnicity, our social class, our educational peers. And we align ourselves against those who are different from us: by race, by nationality, by religion, by political affiliation, or by something as trivial as the kind of music we listen to and the athletic teams we support. When those attitudes, assumptions, and alignments take over our identity and become the most important things to us, well that’s when we might say we too are possessed.

So like he confronted the possessed man, Jesus needs to confront us too, and call out our unclean, unhelpful spirits. Because he *has* to if he is going to rescue us from sin and restore the good creation that God has intended from the beginning. And that means that we need to be honest about the entirety of what he has to say – not just repeat the parts of his message that we like. And of course I need that kind of confrontation as much as you do. Together we confess that “we are in captivity to sin” – that we are *possessed* by sin – “and cannot free ourselves.”

But Jesus is also here to help. His presence in Word and Sacrament breaks the spell, first exposing our possession – bring our unclean spirits to light – and then beginning the process of casting them out. He does this by giving us a new and better identity as freed and forgiven children of God. He does this by liberating us from the old identities that separate and isolate us from one another and alienate us from God. In Holy Baptism we renounce all the powers that defy God. “You belong to Christ,” we declare to all the newly baptized at the font. He has claimed you as his own. So *he* is the one who possesses you now by the power of the *Holy Spirit*. Of course the old spirits resist just as with the possessed man. Being freed from their power is not easy, or fast. We convulse. We cry out. We resist. But Jesus is persistent. He has the authority, the power, and the will to forgive our sin, to heal our broken lives, and to open to us the way genuine, authentic, and everlasting life. May we rejoice in this good news and trust in this promise. And may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

The Rev. Dr. Chris Repp, Pastor
Grace Lutheran Church
Champaign, Illinois