

Here we are on the fourth Sunday in the season of Epiphany- where we celebrate and consider the means by which Christ becomes visible and known to the world- and we are still in the first chapter of Mark's Gospel. As Mark moves us from the Galilee seashore to the synagogue in Capernaum, God moves our attention to a group of people gathered to listen to Jesus teach in the synagogue. It's time for Jesus' public ministry to gather momentum, and Jesus and at least four of his newly called disciples enter the synagogue on the Sabbath where Jesus begins to teach. Let us listen for God's word for us this day but first let us turn to God in prayer. **PRAY. READ.**

Remember how Mark is not one for details? He doesn't tell us the content of Jesus' teaching in the Synagogue. Unlike in Matthew or Luke where there is the Sermon on the Mount or the Sermon on the Plain, Mark's Gospel doesn't include any sermon material, though he does portray Jesus as a teacher with authority. Though we have none of Jesus' words, his actions powerfully speak to the way God intends to free all those imprisoned by evil. Maybe for Mark the teaching wasn't the point? He seems to be honing in here on Jesus' authority- shown through his words and actions. "Mark wants us to know, here at the outset of Jesus' public ministry- that Jesus' authority will be a contested authority. Jesus' presence, words, and deeds threaten other forces that claim authority over people's lives. These other authorities have something to lose" (Matt Skinner, [workingpreacher.org](http://workingpreacher.org) (WP)). Mark tells us that when Jesus teaches, the people gathered are astounded. His teaching is compared to that of the scribes, the keepers of the law. Let's just say that Jesus' presence alone upset the order, crossing an established boundary, not to mention his manner of teaching that

captured everyone's attention. And that exorcism... wow, the focus on Jesus' authority continues! I don't know about you, but I find it absolutely fascinating that the exorcism of an unclean spirit is Jesus' first miracle- his first public deed of power in Mark's Gospel.

When I started reading today's text, did anybody else thinking about the movie, *The Exorcist*? A few weeks ago in our bible study on Wednesday morning, Brian, one of our fearless leaders, brought in this text for us to study. How did he know that I would be preaching on it today? He didn't. We had a really good discussion on this text. And I confessed that I have a tough time talking about unclean spirits or demons- not only because I can't help but go all Hollywood with my imagination- but also, because I am not comfortable with some interpretations of unclean spirits or demons. You see "the cultural distance between the world of this text and society today presents a challenge for interpretation. To attribute symptoms of shouting and convulsing with possession of an unclean spirit is not [congruent] with our understanding of the causes of mental or physical illness" (Cynthia Briggs Kittredge, WP). This all makes me uncomfortable; nevertheless, if you'll sit with me in this discomfort for a minute, perhaps through God's Spirit we'll find that this Gospel story speaks quite powerfully into our own lives today.

"Exorcism was not unusual in Jesus' day. Jewish exorcists used prayers, incantations, medical preparations or stones with special qualities to drive our demons. Yet we Christians don't quite know what to do with stories about demon possession- at least I don't. One pastor put it well. She said, "Like a good, middle-class, mainline Protestant I tend to look down my theological nose at demons as

superstitious, snake-handling stuff, the embarrassing spiritual equivalent to a monster truck rally” (Nadia Bolz-Weber). I wrestle, and I invite you to wrestle with me. C.S. Lewis once wrote, “It is dangerous to deny the existence of the powers of darkness. On the other hand, the other danger is to have an unhealthy interest in them, and in so doing, give them more power than they have, or should have.” So what to do? This exorcism does not eliminate evil and oppression; it denies those kinds of forces the authority or power to hold ultimate sway over people’s lives (Skinner). Whether we believe in demons or not (or call something demonic or not), it doesn’t mean that we don’t have things in our lives that hold us back from God. It doesn’t mean that we don’t have things in our lives that don’t help us to flourish. It doesn’t mean that we don’t have things that make us feel less than or overwhelmed or like we are weighed down by something that’s destroying us inside. We may not call it demonic and we should refrain from calling people “demons” of course. But that doesn’t make Bible stories, such as this one, involving an exorcism irrelevant for us. I think we can agree that all of us “suffer under the bondage of ‘spirits’ that diminish, distort, and wound us. All of us know (or have known) what it’s like to lose agency, mobility, and dignity to forces too powerful for us to defeat on our own. And whether we regard those forces as spiritual, psychological, biological, metaphorical, or cultural, this Gospel story tells us true things about how ‘unclean spirits’ affect and manipulate our souls” (Debie Thomas, [journeywithjesus.net](http://journeywithjesus.net)).

However we understand the concept, stories about Jesus exorcising demons are ultimately about healing and transformation. And even more than that, today’s story is really about Jesus’ authority. This gospel story is about the power of God!

All hail the power of Jesus' name- that is the good news! No evil can withstand the power of God. There are forces that seek to defy God in our world and in our lives. Inside of us, outside us. Jesus clearly engaged and continues to engage the powers and principalities in his ministry. Mark tells us that as those gathered in the house of worship were astounded by Jesus' powerful teaching- a man gets up and interrupts Jesus shouting at him, "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." Notice where and what the unclean spirit was doing. This demon recognizes 'the Holy One of God' before anyone else does" (Thomas). It seems to have no trouble recognizing Jesus' true identity and authority. The same can't be said of the disciples. Isn't that something? Throughout Mark's Gospel, we see people are consistently amazed and astonished at Jesus' teaching and actions but do not realize who he is or place their faith in him. Yet, the unclean spirit understands who Jesus is and his power before any of the disciples do. Some scholars believe the reason Jesus silences the unclean spirit is that in the culture then the one doing the naming had more authority than the one being named (eg. Adam naming the animals in Gen. 2:19-20)" (Osvaldo Vena, WP). After silencing the demon, Jesus commanded it to come out of the man. "The unclean spirit calculates the stakes, realizes that Jesus' presence signifies its doom, and puts up a loud, vicious fight before it surrenders" (Thomas). You see evil forces have the most to lose in the coming of Jesus and the "good news." The crowd responds, "What is this? He commands the unclean spirits and even they obey him" (v. 27). This is the parallel response from the disciples in another story in Mark 4 where Jesus calms the storm, telling the wind and the sea to "be still" and they respond, "Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him"

(4:41)? “Jesus has power over both the natural world (winds and sea) and the supernatural world (demons)” (Hultgren).

Even though the exorcism makes for lively discussion, “the most prominent element in these verses is found in verse 27. Jesus’ teaching is a ‘new teaching-with authority!’ “In a worldly sense, Jesus did not have any authority at all. He was not a worldly king with political or military power. The only authority he had was the supreme confidence that what he did and said was God’s will and God’s truth. His authority lay in his living as God’s servant for Jesus used his authority not to obtain power for himself but to serve humanity (Mark 10:41-45)” (Hultgren). And the impact of Jesus’ actions causes his reputation to grow throughout Galilee. Here Jesus comes as a prophet, exposing the nature of God as the healer, deliverer, and instructor who disrupts and threatens the status quo, as he reveals God and God’s strange wisdom” (John Byron, *Connections*). Remember that those listening that day in the synagogue were powerless and poor in a country occupied by a powerful empire. Can you see why they were astounded and amazed? Jesus brought healing and wholeness and deliverance in all he said and did. He still does. When Jesus removed the unclean spirit, the people in the pews witnessed more than raw physical power; they witnessed the power of God’s love. I imagine it was palpable. Throughout the scriptures, Jesus repeatedly exercises love, compassion, and deliverance to all who come to him. He still does.

The unclean spirit asks Jesus “What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth?” “There’s only one answer, right? ‘Everything. I have everything to do with you.’ Wherever pain is, darkness is, torment is, God is. He has everything to do with us,

even and maybe especially when we're at our worst" (Thomas). Mark shows Jesus as the one who is uniquely authorized, commissioned, and empowered to declare and institute the reign of God. "Jesus' intrusive teaching liberates people from the powers that inflict them and keep all creation- including human bodies and societies- from flourishing" (Skinner). Again, Mark isn't one for details, and we don't know what happened to the man who was possessed by the unclean spirit nor what happened to the unclean spirit. While some details may be skipped, the setting in the synagogue on Sabbath is what renders Jesus' activities there significant (Byron). They remind us that through God's Spirit Christ still shows up and brings healing and wholeness in our "holy" spaces and places as well as in our daily lives.

"Epiphany is not just about longing for and acknowledging past manifestations of Jesus' greatness and the gospel's power; it's also about discovering what deserves our amazement in our and current and longed-for experiences" (Skinner). I want to invite you to ponder with me for a moment on several questions. Where are we still amazed by Jesus' authority, by his teachings and deeds' potential to upend our assumptions about what's possible? Where can we see souls, maybe even our own, set free from destructive tendencies and powers that we thought were beyond anyone's control? Do we believe in or have hope that God overpowers evil?

Friends, may we, "like the crowd in the synagogue, recover holy amazement. May we, like the man with the unclean spirit, experience deliverance as we fight our way towards freedom and healing. And may we, like Jesus, speak words of loving

authority to the world's pain" (Thomas). I don't know about you but count me among the astonished! Before I end, I invite you to close your eyes, and take a deep cleansing breath. I know- maybe a little uncomfortable- but stay with me. You are in the Lord's house. Feel God's presence with you- sitting next to you in the pew while you hear these words of gospel truth from Cole Arthur Riley. **Let your soul receive this rest: the God who resurrects the trees and the grass has mercy on the death of this world, including our own interior decay. God seeks to mend the brokenhearted, provide for the economically oppressed, honor the aging, and protect the vulnerable. Receive forgiveness for the injustices you've participated in and be purged of those that still reside in your own heart. Find renewal in the divine, and welcome healing as it knocks. Let God's powerful, authoritative love reintegrate every part of you that this world has tried to cleave apart, claiming the dignity of our bodies and lives daily. As you receive this mercy, let it hold you and keep you, that your hope and your liberation would be reborn each morning. As the divine meets your shame, your disappointment, your pain with tenderness, you are freed to stand before the earth, neighbor, God, and yourself. In the name of the deliverer, Jesus Christ, may you be made whole... Amen** (Mishmash from Black Liturgies, pages 12 and 152).