

"BELOVED COMMUNITY: HOW WE SERVE"

Mark 1:21-28

January 28, 2018

We struggle with our demons; we struggle with the demons that face us in our everyday lives—our addictions, our fears, our blind hatred, and our anxieties. In this passage from the very first chapter of the Gospel of Mark, the writer wastes no time in calling out the demons of the day and facing them off against the power of Jesus Christ.

Hear what the Spirit is saying to the church through these words:

"Then they entered Capernaum. When the Sabbath arrived, Jesus lost no time in getting to the meeting place. He spent the day there teaching. They were surprised at his teaching—so forthright, so confident—not quibbling and quoting like the religion scholars.

Suddenly, while still in the meeting place, he was interrupted by a man who was deeply disturbed and yelling out, "What business do you have here with us, Jesus? Nazarene! I know what you're up to! You're the Holy One of God, and you've come to destroy us!"

Jesus shut him up: "Quiet! Get out of him!" The afflicting spirit threw the man into spasms, protesting loudly—and got out.

Everyone there was incredulous, buzzing with curiosity. "What's going on here? A new teaching that does what it says? He shuts up defiling, demonic spirits and sends them packing!" News of this traveled fast and was soon all over Galilee."

I was about to turn 16 when I had the brilliant idea to go see the movie everyone was talking about at the time. This movie is still

the 9th all-time grossing full-length feature film in the US and Canada. Of all the movies I have ever seen (and you know I see a LOT of movies), this is the one to this day I wish I never had suffered through.

After I sat through the entirety of "The Exorcist," pretending to my friends that I was neither frightened nor affected by it, I was traumatized for days afterward. I was afraid to go home to my dad's and my apartment, afraid that in the middle of the night he would come out to the couch where I slept and that he would be possessed by the devil. I was afraid that I would go to the kitchen to ask for help with my homework, and his head would swivel around on his neck even more than it ordinarily did. (At age 16, all our parents are possessed to some extent and all their heads seem to swivel around at all unnatural angles so as to catch you doing stupid things!)

I had to sleep with the lights on, something I had not done since I was a little child. I tried to talk to my pastor about my fear of being taken over by an evil spirit like the child was in the film. He just scoffed at me and said the whole idea was "stupid." So helpful. So *very helpful*. I was terrorized by that movie for months, the spell on me broken only when I left to go on a short trip out of town. Man, could I ever have used Jesus in MY synagogue during this time in my life! I think I needed to be exorcised from The Exorcist!

When one reads the Bible, it seems as though demonic possessions and exorcisms was a common thing in those times. We see such stories in both the Old Testament and the New. In the Hebrew scriptures, some license needs to be taken in the stories to connect them to the spirit world, but there are stories in *Genesis* and *Exodus* both that can be interpreted to include the presence of the demonic.

The synoptic Gospels however, tell story after story of demon possession and exorcism. The synoptic Gospels are *Mark*, *Matthew*, and *Luke*. All tolled in these three writings, there are at least eight separate stories on topic. And later in early Christendom, the *Book of Acts* tells us four more. It is fair to say that the idea that humans and animals could be taken over by evil spirits-- and then cleansed of same by holy persons—was an accepted fact in the first century Romanic world, and a probability many centuries before that.

But let me stop the possession-exorcism rhetoric there, for today's passage is not about that nearly as much as our Hollywood eyes and ears wish to think. A closer look at *Mark's* objective reveals his true message for the Beloved Community.

Look at it this way, if you will: The story is certainly compelling, as it has all the elements necessary for a good ghost story sure to make us huddle close together around the campfire:

1. We've got the setting. We all have heard spooky stories of ghosts and evil spirits haunting places of worship. I think I belonged to one of these churches once. There was a spookiness to a particular room in the church. There had been tragedy in that room. It was always freezing cold in there. At times, there was a creepy smell in there. And there were the stories about that room, stories that built upon its mysteries. That church pastor eventually had the room exorcized—I kid you not.

2. We have the setting in the house of worship and we have the contest between the pure spirit entering the worship space (Jesus) and the scary thing from the other world, the possessing spirit, often called by the name, "Legion." Here, Jesus enters the synagogue to teach and preach, but he is interrupted by a very loud demon-within-a-person, a demon who challenges his authority while strangely also acknowledging his divinity. This all happens in the very first chapter of Mark's Gospel; how odd is it that the first voice to acknowledge Jesus as the "Holy One of God" is a demon not of God! This is Mark's first indictment against the religious machine of the day; the supposed holy ones of the Jewish faith, and even the disciples hand-chosen by Jesus, are oblivious to his divinity. It takes a tormented soul to name Jesus for what he is.

3. So, we have the setting—the synagogue—and we have the lead characters—the pure one and the conflicted one. Now we need the face-off. As in all good horror films, the evil spirit seems initially to hold all the cards. The spirit is the scary one, the loud one, the one who sets everyone in the scene back on their heels. We worry for our hero and his friends; how can he overcome what seems to be the insurmountable forces of evil?

4. We have the setting and we have the characters. We have the face-off and the apparent upper hand taken by the forces of darkness. But then we get to the climax of the story. As in other stories of this kind, light wins out over dark. And as in other stories of this kind about Jesus, not only does his light vanquish the darkness, but he goes one step further and *heals* the darkness through the pure light of his compassion.

When the spirit-inflicted man confronts him, Jesus takes him head-on, ordering the tormented spirit to leave his victim. And the spirit complies—just like that. No prayers, no holy water, no scripture, no cross held up to the afflicted man's chest. Nothing artificial. Just pure light meeting the darkness and then it is all over. Love wins.

This is Mark's first statement to the readers of his Gospel about the public ministry of Jesus to the Beloved Community. In Chapter 1

of his *Gospel*, Jesus is first identified as the embodiment of *God's* good news for the people. When first we meet him, Jesus is baptized by John, and then immediately thereafter, he is driven by the Holy Spirit, the *Good Spirit*, out into the wilderness to discover who he really is. He returns to usher in a great time of spiritual transformation with his pronouncement that, "the Kingdom of God is at hand!" and his calling of the disciples.

Jesus wastes no time. He gathers up his disciples and his blessing, and begins immediately to *serve* this Word of God this good news for all the people. He not only talks a good game; he *lives and breathes* what he says. And *that*, my Friends, is the point of this scripture. Mark doesn't just show us torment. He doesn't just set up Jesus as the antithesis of evil, the answer to those forces who would turn their back on *God*. No, for Mark, as for us, it is important-nay it is *imperative*, that Jesus be an action figure in the story of the Beloved Community.

It is not enough that Jesus recognizes the evil and calls it out so that others can take action. No, our very own action hero takes on the evil face-to-face and heals it. That's right—he doesn't get physical with it, or curse it, or point it out to others. He heals it with his light. He stays still, he stays calm, he stays put, and he heals it with his light. He *commands* it to succumb to his holy will, and the spirit obeys.

The demons have returned to us here in full force in the 21st century. We seek them out, we label them, we curse them, and we pray that they will be extinguished, all of these things. But we don't do what Jesus did, and we do not do what Jesus did not.

The first, last (where have we read that before?) You notice that Jesus does not identify the man as the possessed one. The man identifies *himself* to the Christ. Today, we label the ones we demonize; Jesus does not. That may be important for us to note in our little Purple Church here. It seems anymore that whoever we don't like, we label as evil. Whatever cause or political position or party we don't like must be "evil." Must be the darkness. We and we alone are the only ones privy to the light.

That is folly. It is not helpful. And it is not what Christ models for us in this Gospel story. He does not label the evil and when evil calls him out, he serves the Beloved Community not with *hatred*, but with *healing*. Not with judgment. Not with vitriol. Not with self-righteous assurance. But with *healing*. With *compassion*.

I love the way Ismael Ruiz-Millan, from Duke Divinity School, sees this passage. He writes:

"In this text, we see Jesus approach the unapproachable. He shows us that we have to confront evil forces. He makes it clear that we need to pay attention and listen, even to

those who make us uncomfortable or who clearly want to harm us. Jesus shows us in this text how important it is to care for those who are tormented and oppressed by evil. Ultimately, the challenge is to pay attention to the evil that surrounds us, in both its individual and social expression, and to confront it with compassion, just like Jesus did."

It seems to me that this applies no matter who you demonize, no matter how you believe you are living out your Christian faith today. It seems to me that this text calls us to stay in the worship place and confront those things which we fear head on, together, as one Beloved Community. Jesus didn't shoo away his disciples so that they wouldn't have to face evil. Jesus didn't resort to violence, or recrimination either. He didn't quote scripture to the afflicted one or assert his pedigree. He treated the afflicted man instead with compassion and the healing happened.

Hmm, just think how compassion could square off against our own self-declared evils! Can the Christian worship space gird up its loins, open its heart and its mind, and host this dialogue? Like the synagogue was in Mark's gospel story, will the church be the faith-full place for the afflicted to come for help? Will the tormented soul be met here, in God's house, with compassion and love so that the healing may take place?

May it be so. May it be so.