

SUNDAY JANUARY 29, 2012

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.

In Mark 1:21-28 we find a story that has absolutely nothing to do with us today. Really - it has no practical relevance for our modern lives whatsoever. Well – alright - let's read through the story one more time together, and you can stop me if I get to anything that sounds familiar to you.

In this story there is a man: one very normal – and nameless - human being living along the coast of the Sea of Galilee, no one out of the ordinary in the gospel context. We know one fact and one fact only about this man: he has an unclean spirit. That word “unclean” is very descriptive: in the Bible, it means anything that is not sacred, not of God. Unclean is dirty. Ugly. Un-lovely, un-lovable, un-desirable, un-holy. In other words, the unclean spirit represents all the things that we do *not* want to be, and do *not* want coming in and finding a comfortable place in the armchair of our hearts. And that is precisely what kind of problem this man has.

Did you notice that the man does not say one single word in this story, as it is recorded? The man never speaks. Only the unclean spirit speaks. We never get to know the man. What a shame! Perhaps this man had a funny personality, interesting hobbies (maybe he liked basket weaving? perhaps he has a fine palate for kosher wine?), perhaps he is a devoted father or simply a good neighbor – but whatever was knowable and lovable about this man has been forgotten.

From this man, an unclean spirit speaks. In other words, the man has been rendered silent and invisible, while the unclean spirit in him cries out. We don't know quite what this illness is, but we see its effects on the man. The man is all but gone. His true self has been reduced and crushed, made invisible by the presence of an unclean spirit. All that was human and good and decent in this man has been eclipsed by a spirit of ugliness. Out of all that this man surely was, all that we read of in Mark is the unclean spirit, which is not only dirty and ugly but argumentative, aggressive, fearful and violent.

Well, like I said, this is nothing that any of us can identify with. Or... could it be that Mark's story is familiar.... painfully familiar? We may wish that this bore no resemblance to our hearts and lives, but – ouch - it does. As much as it hurts to

admit it, we do all have these moments: moments where something unclean or ugly seems to speak out of us or rears its ugly head. We don't feel like ourselves in those moments, and all that is clean and lovely and good in our hearts is temporarily eclipsed by something.... not so lovely.

If you have ever felt gripped by an addiction, a terrible anger, or a spirit of fear or anxiety, or whatever else, you may feel like the man in today's story – and, well, like a lot of other biblical figures. The Psalmist knew all too well what we are talking about. "Our sins are stronger than we are, but you will blot them out," he writes in Psalm 65.

Like the man in the story, we experience the struggle of our true selves to win out over other voices, other forces. At such times we may feel we have lost our own voice, our strength, our identity - and with it our joy. We know that is not how God has created us to live. We know that we were made for goodness and for joy! But when we are overshadowed by a darkness we cannot shake, we lose our joy. We lose so much. We are sick at heart, sick to our souls – we cause ourselves great pain and inflict wounds on those we love. Like the man in the story, all that is good and true and lovely about is eclipsed by a dark shadow.

But, enough! Enough. There is no need for me to dwell on our sins this morning, because in Mark's gospel, Christ doesn't dwell on them either. Christ has no time for this unclean spirit. *It is nothing to him.* Less than nothing – like swatting a fly! In Christ's presence the unclean spirit doesn't stand a chance. *That* battle was over before it started.

The spirit emits a string of what sounds like terrified chatter, but Jesus cuts it off: **Be silent!** Be silent - and it is silent. With one last heave and shake - the death rattle of an unclean spirit – the man is free. Jesus Christ silences and casts out the forces of darkness – and when the Son has set you free, you are free indeed!

To put this story in context: the gospel of Mark records many confrontations like these, battles between good and evil. This is the first, but the first of many. (There are eighteen miracles recorded in Mark; thirteen have to do with healing, and four are casting out of spirits.) Mark's Christ is a man of power. Evil meets Christ Jesus; evil loses. All of the special-effects battles Mark stages for us have the same outcome. Reading through Mark is bit like watching a Star Wars movie-a-thon: at the end of every episode, Christ triumphs. And in that case our story this morning is the equivalent of the series premiere: *it sets the tone for every encounter to follow.* This is the "set-up" for the entire gospel of Mark.

And in it, what does Jesus do? He frees a soul. He frees *one man's* soul. He stops on a Sabbath, in the midst of his teaching, to free the soul of a nameless, ordinary man. And not a political king, not a religious high priest, not even a disciple – just no one. Mr. Nobody-at-all. Just one human being among the billions. Jesus Christ stops what he is doing – pause, hold - looks right at our man, and speaks the words that set him

free. And the man goes from soul-sick to soul-free in the course of his encounter with Jesus Christ.

Be silent, and come out of him!" And the unclean spirit... came out of him. For Jesus, it is *that* easy.

It occurs to us, perhaps, that Jesus could have started his ministry more dramatically. As the Son of God, Jesus had unlimited options. Where does the Son of God begin? Where would you begin, if you had Christ's power? (Hypothetically, of course?) What would be your first move, if you had unlimited power over the forces and dominions of heaven and earth? By overthrowing corrupt rulers, instituting social justice, by proclaiming peace and salvation on a global scale? Ending racism, sexism, and violence or one of the many other forms of social uncleanness?

In the gospel of Mark, Jesus starts small. Very small. He starts by setting one man free. He starts with a blink-and-you'll-miss-it declaration of freedom for one – just one - soul-sick man. This is Jesus's first move. In effect, Jesus sets the tone for his entire ministry by setting one man FREE of the soul sickness that curses him.

In the grand scheme of things, what is the freedom of one man's soul? Not much. But for the man, it is *everything*. It is the difference between having a voice, and being spoken for; the difference between a real life and a shadow life; the difference between a life of helpless possession and a life of glorious freedom.

Jesus starts in the synagogue on the Sabbath – which is for us church on a Sunday morning – and he speaks the words of freedom over the soul of a man named Mr. Nobody in Particular.

Just one man or woman sitting in the pew on a Sunday morning, sick at heart, longing for freedom: we may not know your name, but when the Son sets you free, you shall be free indeed.

And what freedom! What authority! *They were all amazed... "What is this? A new teaching-- with authority! Authority! Power!* In the gospel of Mark, Christ Jesus comes with the power to set us free.

Brothers and sisters, He has set our souls free. We have come into the presence of the very Christ, and to all that has burdened us, to all that has sickened our souls, to all that has made our hearts unwell, Christ says: BE SILENT! Come out of him. Leave my sister alone. Let my brother be. And when the Son sets us free, we are free indeed.

This is the message of the gospel. This is the power of Jesus Christ. THIS is the foundation of Christ's ministry here among us: soul-freedom. Soul wellness. Soul healing. For you, and for me. This is the foundation of all that Christ has come to do on earth. He begins by setting each of our souls free from darkness.

And it is also the beginning of *our* ministry. All that we are and have, all that we hope to accomplish in the world for Christ, all that we would love to change, begins here. The first encounter, the first touch of Christ, is the healing of all our soul sicknesses, all our unwellness and dis-ease, all that is ugly *inside* of us. First Christ makes us well, and then he sends us out into the world with the power (HIS power) to make *it* well, and to set the world free. Our ministry as disciples of Christ begins with a direct encounter with the Christ, the God-among-us, in whose presence our darkness or unclean-ness does not even stand a chance.

And so like our man, we come to the synagogue (that is, the church) on the Sabbath (that is, Sunday). We come a bit unwell, a touch sick at heart. We come troubled by the temper we can't tame, the fear we can't master, the spirit of self-righteousness or meanness or bitterness or hard-heartedness or whatever.

We walk in the door unsuspecting. We may not even realize what we've been dragging around with us all these years, what soul-sickness has plagued us. Perhaps a weight has been hanging around our necks for so long we don't even notice how bent over we are, how crippled we are by all we've been carrying. Perhaps we've lost our voices, even forgotten what they sound like; perhaps, like the man in the story, we hardly recognize ourselves anymore. Perhaps we have been living in the shadow of something very ugly for a very long time.

(Perhaps not. It's certainly not for me to say.)

And here, Christ speaks. He speaks the sweetest words of freedom your soul has ever heard. All it takes is one encounter with the Christ of power. Be silent! He says to all our illness. Be gone! And when the Son sets you free, brothers and sisters, you are free indeed.

In closing, let's return to our Mr. Nobody, the nameless man in the gospel of Mark who was set free from *his* unclean spirit, and see what happened to him after his encounter with Christ. Well, we don't know. Perhaps he went on to change his neighborhood, to change his world, to enact justice or become an agent of peace. Or maybe he just went home to be a loving father and a good neighbor, and that was more than enough too. Who knows? Mark doesn't tell us.

But of one thing I am certain: *he* was changed. He walked home free. *He recovered his voice!* Free of the dark, the unclean, the painful, the soul-sickness, the ugly that had gotten him down for so long. He walked home free. And I'll bet he was singing as he walked.

Amen!