

GOSPEL READING: Mark 1:21-28

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²¹ And they went into Caper'na-um; and immediately on the sabbath he entered the synagogue and taught. ²² And they were astonished at his teaching, for he taught them as one who had authority, and not as the scribes. ²³ And immediately there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit; ²⁴ 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." ²⁵ But Jesus rebuked him, saying, "Be silent, and come out of him!" ²⁶ And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him. ²⁷ And they were all amazed, so that they questioned among themselves, saying, "What is this? A new teaching! With authority he commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him." ²⁸ And at once his fame spread everywhere throughout all the surrounding region of Galilee.

OLD TESTAMENT READING: Isaiah 58: 5-9

Is such the fast that I choose, a day to humble oneself? Is it to bow down the head like a bulrush, and to lie in sackcloth and ashes? Will you call this a fast, a day acceptable to the LORD? ⁶Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? ⁷Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin? ⁸Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly; your vindicator^[a] shall go before you, the glory of the LORD shall be your rearguard. ⁹Then you shall call, and the LORD will answer; you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am.

“Kingdom Authority”

“First things first”. We’ve all been told this by some wise mentor, right? That’s because first things matter. The first things that people choose to do, or the first things that come to mind, or the first things that people might think to tell another are often the things which are most important, which have priority. Well, today in the 1st chapter of Mark, we read of Jesus’ first act of his ministry. It is a story of Jesus freeing a man from an unclean spirit, and it shows us what Mark believes is at the heart of Jesus’ ministry and mission. That is, *Jesus commands authority, Kingdom authority in word and deed, against all forces that rob people of abundant life, of joy, meaning and purpose.*

It happens in a synagogue in Capernaum. It’s the Sabbath and a congregation is gathered, quietly sitting in the worship space. Then Jesus begins to teach. What he says we’re not told, for that is not what is most important. It is how he teaches. Suddenly, shattering the decorum of the Sanctuary, a man with an unclean spirit cries out, *“I know you, Jesus. You are the Holy One of God, come to destroy us.”* (Well, these days, we don’t know exactly how to process “unclean spirit”, but certainly we want to avoid the way it’s been conflated with mental illness over the centuries. No doubt this man is being held captive by something evil. He may have become a danger to himself and others, and he’s probably a social outcast. His family and those who love him are distressed and worried about his future.¹

The demons in him cry out. They recognize Jesus, when no others do, because they know their enemy. They’ve met him before, and they don’t want “loose playground space”.² But we’re told that Jesus speaks to them with authority. His authority has both “right” and “power”, a right to speak as God and a “power” which comes from himself.³ He looks them in the eye and utters a command that causes all hell to break loose. The demons stir and leave the man. And the people are astonished, saying, “What is this?”. (*repeat*) They are, as Lamar Williamson

¹ David Lose. “Epiphany

² Rachel May. Sermon: “Even the Demons” www.asermonforeverysunday.com (accessed 1/25/18).

³ Lamar Williamson, Jr. *“Interpretation: Mark”*. Mays, Achtemier, eds, (Louisville: JKP; 1983), 50-51.

says, “confronted with a decision of faith”,⁴ for THIS teacher’s words have power to make the unclean, clean.

So, in this “first things first” story, we’re not to focus ultimately on the demons, nor are we concentrate on what they have to say or even how Jesus effectively exorcises them. The story is given us to make clear what the rest of the story is about! The One for whom no oppressive boundary will stand has come to earth! “The boundary between heaven and earth has been pierced with the power of Jesus, and the new age of God’s reign is at hand.”⁵ (*repeat*)

Rev Rachel May says that when we, the crowd in the TODAY’S worship space, hear this story, we become “quiet at the table”.⁶ She’s referring to the familiar scenario that we’ve all experienced when a subject is introduced into a conversation about which we know very little, about which we feel inadequate to speak...*maybe stem cell research or the newest software developments, or, in my house, the sliding mode control for parasitic power consumption minimization!* We also may become quiet because the subject which has been introduced is so astounding that it takes our breath away. We can’t find the words. Well, whatever the reason, we must take a breath and find our voice. We must speak about this. This is the lesson’s take-away. We must speak what we know, even if we do so inadequately for we are here being put on notice that Jesus expects of his followers far more than “amazement.”⁷(*repeat*)

*Kathleen Norris, widely renown Christian speaker, **tells** of when her husband, who has a “much sweeter nature than her”, once told her that her quick temper grieved him, not just because of the pain it caused him, but because it was doing her harm. “His comment felt like an exorcism,” she says, because it was calling her to pay attention to the anger that she used too often to gratify herself or to deny her fears, a demon that was out of control and was hurting her marriage. She concludes, “the thing which could kill was transformed into that which can heal.”*⁸

⁴ Lamar Williamson.

⁵ Gary Charles. “Exegetical Perspective of Mk 1:21-28” In: D Bartlett, B Brown Taylor (eds), Feasting on the Word. (Louisville: WJKP; 2008), 313.

⁶ Rachel May.

⁷ Gary Charles.

⁸ Kathleen Norris. <https://sermons.com/home/illustrations/2018-01-28>. (accessed 1/27/18).

*In a very popular novel series, Catherine Verlenden, **writes** of being exorcised of her demon, fear. It happened when she, a recently divorced woman with two boys, was traveling across the US to make a new start in California. She recalls sitting on the ceramic tile of her hotel bathroom crying and sick with worry, for the next morning they were making a 16-hour trip across the Mojave desert. The confidence which she'd had 3 days earlier, at the start of their trip, had disappeared. She'd heard the "horror stories of radiators run dry, blow-outs, and isolation under the sun which crisps tender flesh". She opened her Bible to Rev 12 where she found a description of the woman who fled into the desert to a place of safety, prepared for her by her God. This gave her great peace, and to her surprise the next day, when the sun was beginning to beat down, a single small cloud appeared in the sky. It came over her little car and its shadow fell on them the whole day, following them like a "homing device", this way and that. It went with them until it became one of many, when, she says, "the highway tunneled them back into civilization".⁹*

*Then, in a popular PBS documentary, the producers **filmed** Tamir and Said, and Natifa, and Sadiq and Azizzula telling their stories. They filmed them from a tent in northern Iraq, a refugee camp in Greece, an immigrant housing compound in Germany, a burned out, abandoned train car in Serbia, and from the forests of North Africa. These people are a handful of the 1.5 million who have, since 2015, fled their homelands due to war and poverty and disease. As the producers present their sad stories, it's clear that these people's demons are fear, grief, traumatic memories, but also the anguish of rejection. With the tightening of borders in Europe and the turning of public opinion against them, a terror which no human should go through has become their horrible nightmare. While the battle is nowhere near over, the producers' witness to God, our demon-dashing, boundary-breaking God, is evident when they end the documentary in silence with a picture of Sadiq finally smiling, thumbs up, and a caption under him reading, "Sadiq has been granted asylum in Finland".¹⁰*

⁹ Catherine Verlenden. *A Place Prepared by God*. In: J. Canfield, MV Hansen, et al., *Chichen Soup for the Christian Soul: 101 Stories*. (Deerfield Beach, FA: Health Communications, Inc; 1997), 347-50.

¹⁰Abi Mowbry, James Blumel (producers), *"The Journey Continues: Exocus"* In: Frontline. <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/film/exodus-the-journey-continues/>. (accessed 1/27/18).

Brothers and sisters, we don't have to have a forum for public speaking, or being an author in a book, or producers of a documentary film, but we can still be channels for the living, authoritative word of Jesus Christ, in this world that demons still haunt. Can we not testify, friends, to having seen beloved children of God, racked with addiction or weakened by disease, now sober or disease-free? Can we not speak of men or women who've spent years in prison now living changed, repentant lives and holding down productive jobs? Can we not point to couples who we know have been estranged and bitter, but now are reconnected, forgiving, and forgiven? Can we not be witnesses to lands that were once barren and dying but are now covered with green and new lush life?

Yes, we can. We MUST be sharers of the Good news through any and all opportunities which present themselves. If we don't, brothers and sisters, people may not know that Jesus stands steadfastly against all those forces which keep them down, that he will touch all that seems beyond their reach or is broken beyond repair, that he is prepared to do battle with anyone or thing that tries to steal from them the joyful abundant life that is promised? If we don't speak what we know even if it is inadequate, how will others come to ask, "What is this?" How will they make a decision of faith?

Come friends, let us go forth as agents of his kingdom authority. Let go into the age to come, for God's reign is at hand. Amen.