



SERMONS THAT WORK

Epiphany 4 (B)

Unclean Spirits

[RCL] Deuteronomy 18:15-20; Psalm 111; 1 Corinthians 8:1-13; Mark 1:21-28

So, friends, today we are going to talk about evil spirits, unclean spirits, the demonic. Go ahead and wiggle in your seats... it is an uncomfortable topic for most of us 21st-century moderns, blessed with the scientific method. We are quite happy to be Jesus' followers when it comes to feeding the poor, praying for one another, proclaiming God's way of justice and mercy, but casting out demons? In Mark's Gospel, casting out demons isn't something incidental to the Good News; rather it is an essential part of it—there are four exorcisms in this shortest of Gospels. Most of us dismiss it or are freaked out by it, rather than grateful, excited, or even curious about it. Let's dive deeper into today's story, exploring it from the perspectives of its four characters: Jesus, the demons, the man who was possessed by them, and the crowd at the synagogue. Inhabiting the story through these four lenses might help us believe, despite our unbelief.

First, Jesus. Jesus is fresh from his baptism and wilderness experience. Immediately after he is baptized, the Spirit drives him out into the wilderness for his showdown with the Chief Evil Spirit, Satan, and Jesus resists temptation for forty *long* days. The wilderness experience is so taxing that God sends angels to wait on Jesus. Perhaps his encounter with the demonic shapes Jesus' compassion for us and clarifies his mission. Yes, people make mistakes and are sinful, but there are forces far beyond us and way outside our control that seduce us away from Truth, Beauty, Goodness – in short, seduce us away from God. In this brief story, still in the first chapter of Mark, Jesus is in the local synagogue “teaching with authority.” He doesn't know *about* God, he knows God *directly* – and there is a big difference. And in the midst of his teaching, a man with an unclean spirit interrupts him, yells at him, disturbs the whole congregation. Jesus responds with calm strength, rebuking that spirit, and freeing the man for the abundant life God meant for him to live.

Secondly, the Unclean Spirit. This demon is smart; he knows, before any human being does, who it is he is dealing with: The Holy One of God. He vies for dominion in this man's life and doesn't want Jesus' interference. You see, in the presence of Goodness, Evil often interrupts and tries to get our attention. One of the ways it tries to hold on to its power is by shaming the man it occupies. Shame is a powerful force, and demons exploit it to bind and restrict people all the time! This Unclean Spirit seems to have a community of other evil spirits and rightly feels threatened by the presence and power of the One who

knows God, the One whom we come later to believe is God, and so he cries out: “What have you to do with us?”

Thirdly, the man who is possessed. Did he feel incredibly embarrassed and ashamed? How much agency did he have in all of this? Was there a terrible struggle within him? His true self, the part that bears the image of God, desired liberation and wholeness. Maybe that’s the part of him that drew him to the synagogue, a holy place. He likely felt trapped by this Spirit, knowing and thinking, “That’s not the real me.” Can you relate to this at all? Like when a young parent loses temper with their toddler? Or when someone living in the grips of an addiction doesn’t recognize the person they’ve become? Can you relate to that idea of the gap between who you *most truly are* and how you *sometimes act*?

And finally, there is the crowd, the folks in the synagogue. They had been amazed, almost enraptured by Jesus’ teaching, his clear authority, his presence. Were they disgusted when the man came in screaming? “Why can’t he get control over himself?” Were they afraid? “What if that happened to me?” Did they feel threatened? “What if I don’t have as much control as I thought I did?” Surely, all of them were shaken up after Jesus rebuked the demon. In those moments, they had seen God’s power triumph over the forces of evil, and they went out to tell others about it – to process what they had seen.

So as we reflect on this story from these four points of view, take these observations for your consideration...

Evil exists. This story doesn’t offer us any satisfactory explanation for where evil spirits came from, much less why they exist, much less why this particular demon afflicts this particular guy. The story simply acknowledges the reality. Evil is a force that tends toward death—physical or literal—over which we often have little if any control; we are held in bondage by it.

Optimistic human beings tend to overestimate our ability to overcome evil, and our pride gets in the way: “If I only do *x*, *y*, and *z*, then I can handle this (fill-in-the-blank: addiction, rage, violence). If I really focus on eliminating this problem, I can overcome it.”

Consequently, we are reluctant to ask for divine aid, for God’s help. When we are dealing with evil, with the demonic, the sooner we can admit our need for help, the better. Like the first step in 12-step wisdom: We admitted we were powerless over alcohol—that our lives had become unmanageable.

God’s power is stronger than Satan’s. Or, as it the poet put it in the Song of Songs, “Love is strong as death.” As the second step says: “We came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.”

And coming to believe in this Power, we are able to ask for divine aid. Sometimes this comes directly from God, as it did for the man in the story. Jesus was there. Jesus rebuked the demons. The man was free.

But for most of us, divine intervention is mediated by other human beings: a wise therapist, spiritual friendships, 12-step programs. And divine intervention happens through what we are doing right now. In corporate worship, the divine liturgy, God draws our attention toward his good purposes and equips us—yes, us, these modern-day disciples—to cast out demons.

Now it's understandable if this Good News is hard to take in, to process, to believe. In the fourth and final exorcism that Jesus performs in Mark, Mark anticipates how hard this stuff is for us to grasp. You remember the story: the healing of the boy with the unclean spirit. The father desperately approaches Jesus, afraid for his boy's life. His son is regularly cast into water and fire. The father prays, perhaps as we do today, "I believe; help my unbelief," and that was enough. Jesus freed the boy from the demon for the life God intended for him.

I believe; help my unbelief. Amen.

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