

Providence Presbyterian Church
Rev. David Pettit
January 31st, 2021
Mark 1: 21-28

It was a peaceful Sabbath in the synagogue until some guy's demons evidentially felt threatened. It had been a lovely Sabbath service up to that point. Families had come in their normal go-to-meeting clothes, sitting orderly in their familiar places along the benches which lined the wall or sitting on the floor. They sang their responses, stood as the scroll was brought to the pulpit, and listened as the holy scriptures were read. There was a new preacher that morning, a visiting rabbi. And you know how pulpit supply can be... everybody is different, and you never know quite who you are going to get. But on this particular Sabbath, it was a rabbi named Jesus who hailed from Nazareth. He read the Torah and then sat in the seat of Moses, sat as a teacher sits in authority, in the seat where Moses' law is brought to light.

He was personable and animated. You could understand him, could relate to him. Contrary to the average rabbi who went on and on quoting the various rabbis, Jesus spoke with authority. He spoke with clarity, asserting the text's meaning and relevance to the moment. He brought it home. The scriptures did not live for the rabbinic dialogue but in hearts and in the dust of the streets. Jesus understood his very self and his life and mission to be the fulfillment of the scriptures. So, he spoke with conviction and clarity. And these weekly worshippers were engaged and interested and listening with a different curiosity and level of attention.

I imagine it being around the time for coffee hour, tea, and flatbread (whatever they served), when everybody was nodding to one another and murmuring praise for the sermon. They commented about how remarkable it was and with what boldness and authority he spoke. Mothers were pushing their sons forward, hoping that perhaps the rabbi would take these boys under his tutelage. And then the lovely Sabbath atmosphere was interrupted like a cymbal crash, as one man started shouting rudely at their guest, fingers flying, face all flushed, garnishing a room full of gasps.

Mark says it was a man with an unclean spirit. Now, diagnosing demons and unclean spirits has always been a tricky business, easily leading to imprecise conclusions. And diagnosing such things in the ancient Near East and in the biblical world was quite different than how we would diagnose and treat. In the ancient world, a great many things that might affect one's body or spirit or

emotions or circumstances would be attributed to the realm of spirits and divine beings and activities.

This was a main arena of scholarship in the ancient world: it was called divination, the field of knowing the signs and connections between the minute details of life and body and various occurrences, and what it meant in the realm of the spiritual and divine. There was no clear line between the medical, psychological, emotional, and spiritual in such a context. One of the most common text types recovered from ancient archives in places like Nippur is these divination or omen texts. These texts detail seemingly random aspects of the world or the body or chance occurrences with an interpretation of what it meant, and perhaps an action to deal with it.

Such a world is a bit foreign to us. We are a medically oriented society for one, and we have many specializations, for two. So, if at the end of our service, one of you started going off like this man does, if you started spouting rather outlandish statements, and convulsing, and shouting and accusing, or other such behaviors, our diagnostic brains would start responding. Does this person need a medical doctor, a psychiatrist, a pharmacist, a therapist, a twelve-step support group, a dietician? If it is a child, they probably need their electronic device back. Who took it from them?! We would be slower to assume an exorcist is what we need.

Well, diagnosing the various things that can manifest in us is a tricky business, even for us medically and specialist-oriented folks. There is a common conception in our religious tradition that seems to carry-through nonetheless. It is that of sin. The things that are out of order, the infractions we may have committed, or the brokenness that continues to manifest itself in our lives. But in an ancient context, what we might call sin, all gets lumped into the category of unclean spirits and demons. So, it does make me wonder what triggers this guy's "unclean spirit" and the nature of this person's condition and why the aggressive response.

And I wonder further, what in us might cause us to act out, and what in us might get diagnosed similarly. What lives under the skin that might get activated when Jesus comes close and speaks with authority in our lives?

Now you may be slightly offended by the suggestion that there might be something in each of us comparable to this guy whose unclean spirit is going off on Jesus. Perhaps we picture such a person as exceptional, as particularly odd and troublesome, some haggardly looking man with torn clothes and foaming at the mouth. The artwork on our bulletin conveys him that way, wearing a dirty smock. But perhaps we shouldn't be too quick to assume that the hard to diagnose conditions only live in the destitute-looking; they can easily dwell under a neck-tie

or fresh hair-do or new outfit. In fact, nothing calls attention to this person before he starts shouting. He sits through the entire service unsuspecting. It is more likely that he is just a normal-looking worshipper. Just one of the congregation, I suspect.

This kind of occurrence might be off-putting for some, though I'm sure it would keep my son Hudson's interest in church for some time. He'd come in the next week looking you all up and down, wondering who it's going to be this week.

This man went through the whole service, he is almost out the door and the spirit in him starts going off. So close! It makes me think of my family visiting us a couple years ago. They stayed about five days, which is a long stretch for us to be in each others' space, a lot of time to push each others' buttons, get agitated, and react. It is good to be with each other and you just hope no one gets into an argument. We made it, though I was feeling it by the end, and I took deep breaths the whole way to the airport, almost there, almost there. I got them off, drove home, and within a half-hour of being home, I got a call. Flights were canceled and rescheduled for the morning. Another 24 hours! We made it fine, but remember that feeling of trying to keep it together.

Well, this guy doesn't get out the door before his buttons get pushed and he is making a scene. "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." What was this demon's problem anyway; why did he snap and start shouting at Jesus? It knew who Jesus was, more so than anyone else. In fact, commentators have noted that in Mark's gospel, it is only the demons and the foreigners who recognize who Jesus really is that he is far more than just a popular rabbi or political hopeful. The demon recognizes Jesus for who he is, the Holy One of God, and he is afraid that Jesus is up to something, that Jesus will destroy him. I guess demons have an instinct of self-preservation. I guess we have an instinct of self-preservation, often keeping hidden these parts of us.

The demon is alert to the fact that though no one else in the synagogue that day knew what lay below the surface of this man, Jesus did. Jesus was not just concerned with ideas and with proper worship and outward good deeds. Jesus was also aware and interested in what lies beneath the skin, even in the depths of one's heart. So, therefore, this demon normally hid and safe, apparently felt exposed. Furthermore, the demon knew that Jesus actually had authority and power and posed a threat to his quiet hide-out.

Now, I don't assume that lying under the skin of someone here this morning, is some hostile demon or spirit. But nonetheless, there is much that lives under our

skin that the ancients lumped together with the spiritual realm. There is a lot in the depths of our hearts that the average person doesn't see upon brief interaction; maybe a good deal that even our best friends do not see. We have quiet places in our hearts, secrets, hurts, or even "demons" in a metaphorical sense. These live in us, quiet enough that most do not notice, until something triggers that part of our story, our insecurity, or pain, or past, and we might react in some seemingly uncharacteristic manner, even as this man lashes out at Jesus.

It makes me remember Sue, a woman in her forties who started participating as a Young Life leader back in my YL days in Binghamton, NY. She was fun, spunky, quick to tout her lack of qualifications, but she was always interested and willing to learn, eager to grow. She would apologize for being old, and for not knowing her Bible and such things. However, her spirit and energy and willingness to grow were qualifications enough. But I remember one leadership meeting where we spent time reading the Bible and applying it to what it meant to be a leader. It was a great, upbeat dialogue. I left feeling encouraged. Sue left in seemingly good spirits.

While Sue contributed and was interested and engaged, she left and her insecurities and doubts crept in, and she reinterpreted everything about the meeting. About two days later, I got this long rampage of an email from Sue. She was angry and upset at how everyone made her feel, how she felt called out and embarrassed for not having the training and not knowing her Bible, and on and on, and said I didn't want her as a leader. It seems that despite her upbeat participation, everything about the conversation hit at her insecurities, fears, feelings of not being good enough, of not doing enough; and after a couple days of stewing on it, she reacted on the offensive. Perhaps her response was not completely unlike the demon shouting "Jesus, what have you to do with us, have you come to destroy us?"

I wonder if this story is somewhat representative of all of us. What lies beneath the skin, in the depths of heart? What insecurities, guilt, pain? What truth, or secret, or worry? Is it helpful to know that Jesus knows it all? Or is it threatening to know that Jesus' redemptive mission doesn't stop at the skin-level?

These healing stories of Mark seem to identify and establish Jesus as the messiah. They do so by showing that Jesus is capable of two things. He both teaches the law with insight and authority and that he has the power over all the spiritual forces that affect and inhabit the world, and even our bodies, hearts, and spirits. Jesus commands the law, and he controls the spiritual world, all those hard to diagnose pains and ailments and flaws that the ancients lumped together as demons and spirits, and that we might lump together under the category of sin.

That is when Jesus' fame took off. They realized that Jesus had authority, not just to teach about ideas and behavior, but the power to tame the unclean spirits that live under the surface that don't die easy, and that tend to give us convulsions when someone gets too close.

In the end, I think this man was probably quite grateful, though the story doesn't tell us. It must have been freeing to not have that inner weight, that inner battle, that inner secret. What Mark does tell us, is that the people were amazed. And rather than pulling back, they soon began to bring to Jesus all who were prone to convulsions, who needed healing beneath the surface.

The religious leaders, on the other hand, weren't too happy. For one, they couldn't compete, and for two, they had other concerns in mind. They were concerned with power and position, and they weren't too interested in meddling in the stuff of one's heart and one's demons because that can get messy fast.

The good news of the gospel is that the work of God through Jesus extends to the uttermost parts of our hearts, that nothing is hidden from him, and that though we may convulse when others get too close, in the end Jesus has not come to destroy, or condemn, but to heal and forgive and restore. And we are invited to bring our hearts so that our hearts may, little by little, be freed to love fully, both God and others.

In her poem, "Instructions for the Journey," by Pat Schneider writes:

The self you leave behind
is only a skin you have outgrown.
Don't grieve for it.
Look to the wet, raw, unfinished
self, the one you are becoming.
The world, too, sheds its skin:
politicians, cataclysms, ordinary days.
It's easy to lose this tenderly
unfolding moment. Look for it
as if it were the first green blade
after a long winter. Listen for it
as if it were the first clear tone
in a place where dawn is heralded by bells.

The first green blade, the first clear tone. Not destruction. Healing. Addressing the hard to diagnose aspects that speak to our sin, hurt, brokenness, to the unhealed and unreconciled aspects of our being. It might feel threatening, dangerous even. But like the man standing in his right mind, a new self might be emerging, becoming. That is why they were amazed that day. And they gave themselves to the possibility, going out and bringing all the sick to the one who can bring hope and healing for all that lies beneath the skin.

The Man with an Unclean Spirit
(Lk 4.31—37)

²¹ They went to Capernaum; and when the sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught. ²² They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes. ²³ Just then 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 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.” ²⁸ At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.