

January 31, 2021

“What do you have to do with us?”

Text: Mark 1: 23-28

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, throwing him into convulsions 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.

Sermon:

Demons appear all over the place in the Gospels. Some seventy times and throughout all four of the Gospels Jesus comes face-to-face with them. In some ways, it seems that Jesus’ daily preoccupation and the thing that thrusts itself in front of him each and every day—are demons. Demons are all over the place in the Gospels, even if we rarely want to talk about them. I think it’s one of those things about the Bible that we struggle with because it’s hard to put our finger on what that term means. Some are quick to dismiss demons as fairy creatures from past times; some are eager to apply current understandings—whether psychological or health—to explain what it is that Jesus is confronting there in the Bible. Yet, here is what we know from all four Gospel-writers’ perspective, and that is that Jesus acknowledged them as existent. Jesus talked to them. And as in so many passages, Jesus asked questions of them, expecting them to answer.

About demons, I think we’ve made an uneasy truce in our times. In some ways it’s helpful, but we often seek to understand them through the lens of mental or physical challenges. Some view them as a manifestation of those habits and choices that lead nowhere good. The risk of these approaches, as Paul Hooker reminds us, is that they end up psychologizing these episodes in the Bible. And the risk of that is that they turn Jesus into more of a therapist than a messiah—more of a coach than a teacher and more of a pleader than one with absolute authority, which is on full display in this morning’s Gospel reading. A gift of the Bible, however, and the way that Jesus confronts these demons—is that they are given tangibility; they are given a power, and any of us who have struggled with demons know that they indeed have power. Rather than the shadowy, hidden status that we often afford them in our time, in the Bible, these forces take on real form. Ironically though, and powerfully—having been brought to life, these demons can then be confronted by the source of all life. Not discounting their power, they can be brought to face an even greater power—one that Mark begins his Good News with today.

I’ve been blessed with many great teachers in my life. And I count as a profound blessing having been taught by the man who wrote that sung response that John just sang—a man by the name of Tom Troeger, a man with a great mind and an even greater heart. I took classes from him on both music and preaching at Yale Divinity School, and he taught me all sorts of technical and *tactical* things—but more importantly, at the core of all his teachings was the question of how to bring something to life. He had us consider how to bring these truths in the Bible to life so that they might inspire us—they might lead us—that they might make us learners, and lead us to our passions. His most recent work is a tiny little gem called *Wonder Reborn*, and although I

couldn't find it in time for this sermon, the reason I wanted to have it is because the cover is decorated with another kind of biblical creature who shows up all the time in the Bible and that we also sometimes struggle with—or maybe try to explain them or hide them in a corner, even if they simply want to touch our hearts, and by that, I'm talking about angels, right. Angels and demons. And those angels are not just on the cover of the book; there's a group of them dancing and there's another group of them playing instruments, evoking wonder in life.

That hymn that's found in the New Century Hymnal, "Silence: Unclean, Frenzied Spirit," is the only hymn that I'm aware of that directly address this subject of demons (and I know that Jack's out there and so is Tracy, so if you know of another on the same theme, please send it to me...) Demons show up seventy times in the Gospels and yet to leaf through our hymnal, you would hardly know that they exist. This hymn is a gift because it makes those demons tangible that pop up so often, and might I testify that it's not just in the pages of the Bible but also in the pages of our own stories too, amen! Perhaps, the power of this hymn comes from that description that Noah sent in—that it was written out of Tom's desperate need to understand this idea of demon—not just for himself but to care for others. Maybe that's why the authority that's in this song and the truth that's in it echoes so loudly and it's not just the words that Tom picks out that brings the subject to life, it's also the way that it partners with the music—that dissonance in the beginning yielding to a more resolved sense in the conclusion. That cohesiveness emerges out of his long partnership with musician Carol Doran—bringing lectionary texts to life and giving realness to these things that the Bible calls *demons*. You know demons—those things that cause friction, stress and anxiety in our lives—those things that make our lives dissonant, harried and frantic. When I think about demons in a larger context, I think about those things that diminish our lives or maybe more to the point—hold us back from the fullness of life. But the hymn takes it one step further; it reminds us that it's the very real power of Jesus that sends the demons fleeing. Because as prevalent as demons are in the Gospels, Jesus is even more adamant about his mission—that he came that we might have life, and have it abundantly.

So what can we take from this encounter with demons on this Sabbath day when we bring our full lives before the fullness of God's love? And on this annual budget day, what can we take from this reading when we're about to discern where to put our hearts? For, after all, Jesus the great teacher reminds us that where we put our money—there our hearts will follow. The first thing is that Jesus absolutely has something to do with these demons. "What have you to do with us?" they ask, and he makes it clear that he has *everything* to do with them. But more than having something to do with the Spirit, the depth of this story reveals that the reason Jesus has something to do with demons is that he has everything to do with us—with the fullness of who we are and that nothing needs to be kept in the shadows. I want you to notice a couple things about this demon. While the Spirit often speaks in the collective "we," Mark talks about a single unclean spirit; yet notice the demon talks in the collective for this demon isn't asking what Jesus has to do with him but rather with *all* such beings. Mark has this beauty of leaving things open and here he wants us to know that this question is not just about that demon on that day for that particular man—but for my demons and yours too—the ones that have already come and left, the ones that are with us now, and the ones that may come knocking on our door tomorrow.

The demon is essentially saying, 'What does our existence look like to you, Jesus?' I couldn't help but be struck by that same thought: 'Wow! What would our lives look like if that was the

question on our hearts and lips every single time we attended worship?’ In other words, ‘Jesus, what do you have to do with us?’ Imagine what might happen! Jesus does what he always does; he answers that question but not with words or a description, but instead, with a demonstration. What Jesus has to do with our demons, no matter what their former shape—is liberation and freedom—not for them but for us. Notice that the demon is worried about destruction. He asks, “Have you come to destroy us?” But that’s not what Jesus does, either in that moment or in this one. Instead, Jesus always focuses on building up—on strengthening and empowering, and of drawing the Kingdom of God nearer. So what he says to that demon is, ‘Get out of here!’ Leave that person alone until your diminishing whispering no longer plague their minds.

Did you notice that Mark said that all the people in the synagogue were amazed? Can you blame them? They were utterly amazed and had all these questions, but Mark doesn’t talk about what I wanted to know. How was the man who’d been healed? How did that man leave the synagogue that day? Oh, I know that he left the synagogue with the demon no longer with him, and I imagine that he wanted to stay by Jesus’ side from that day on; I imagine that having seen the authority of Jesus on full display that that man knew that he needed to submit to that authority in everything that he did—how he lived, what he did, and how he spent his money—all of it. I also imagine that when the next demon came along, trying to latch on and hold him back that that man no longer felt he must silently go along but instead could and did confront the demon, knowing where the true power lies and knowing that Jesus was by his side. He probably knew what James Baldwin famously pronounced in what is at the heart of Niebuhr’s Serenity Prayer—the truth that not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it’s faced. What that man knew without a doubt is what we need to know today—that we don’t face that demon alone—we do it with Christ, and what Mark wants us to know this morning is that perhaps even more than facing the demon is instead looking into the face of Christ, from whom demons flee. As Paul sums up: “If God is with us, who can be against us?”

Over time there is something else that I came to imagine about this man. I imagine that he never forgot the aloneness that he felt in facing his demon and forever after that he didn’t want one of his brothers or his sisters to have to face that same fate. And I imagine what he learned from the great teacher Jesus is to go where others are struggling—to be with them and to help them know that they’re not alone—to help them look in the face of Jesus and find the hope and power that’s there—that is what I hope we leave here doing today too. Remember, friends, that the reason Jesus has absolutely something to do with demons—and not just the one but the all—is because Jesus has everything to do with us. I came that all of you might live abundantly—he said.

The other thing I want to take a brief look at this morning is to imagine what demons we might carry even now—what gets in the way of our full living and what gets in the way of our full following? On that particular day, people left that synagogue ready to do something because of the power they saw so clearly in front of them. And we know that they did something because it says, ‘At once the fame of Jesus began to spread’—not as an end in itself as fame too often today is—but rather that fame in Mark’s Gospel is so important because it leads other people to come find Jesus. From this point forward, Jesus will be besieged by everyone and anyone who wants to be taught or who wants to be healed. So what will we do when we leave here this morning? How will we spread the fame of Jesus when we leave here this morning? Not as an end in itself but so that all the broken and breaking people might find hope—that people might find love—that

people might find connection. Will it invite others into this collective journey that never denies the existence of pain and suffering but rather invites others into the company, the courage and the power of God to transcend it and to go beyond it? Remember how in Isaiah it is God who says, “When you walk through the raging rivers, you will not be overwhelmed; when you walk through that fire, you will not be consumed because I love you and you’re precious, and in fact I will send my only son wrapped in love to save you.” Because finally the incarnate love of God has everything to do with us and our demons too.

Today is an important day to ask ourselves individually and collectively—what is holding back? What is diminishing us? Because after worship today in our budget meeting we will be answering the question of what we as a church will leave this place doing. How we will resource our ministries to show the love of Christ to this corner of the world, for in many ways what we resource in our budget will be those things that are most visible and most noticeable; in some ways it will be how we collectively point our way to Christ. By the way, that doesn’t get you off the hook from going out and spreading the Good News yourself. So as we get ready to think about that budget, we also need to prayerfully consider where our demons might be holding us back. We need to consider where we might not be being bold enough or settling for safety cause the risks seem too high, or those places where we may be doing things that aren’t serving or teaching or learning or walking—those places where we may limit ourselves because of the insidious whispers of inadequacy or fears of those demons, rather than hearing God’s whisper of a loving call and recognizing the power behind it.

Are we ready to face our demons—or more importantly—to look Christ in the eye, to his teachings and doings and then submit to his authority even if it makes us nervous? Friends, this is only the beginning of Mark’s Gospel, as it is only the beginning of this new budget year. It is a Gospel that turns everything right side up; may we be part of that in the year to come. It is a Gospel full of action and movement that constantly asks us to ‘Come and see’; may we likewise spread that message far and wide. And it constantly reminds us that should we dare, the loving hand of Christ will be there to lead us forward, even as the awesome power of Christ clears the way of everything in front of us. I don’t know what you are wrestling with today; I don’t know if you’re full of joy or plagued by a nagging demon in the recess of your mind, but know this—Christ is there and so are we. Christ has the power and we will try to use it. There is indeed a “Balm in Gilead that will make the wounded whole.”

Amen.

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