

Unclean Spirits

In our journey this year with Jesus, walking with the gospel writer Mark, get ready for his breathless pace, plenty of mystery, and his focus on action over words.

After all, it is Mark's gospel that ends with terrified women standing in the empty tomb.

A young man tells them that Jesus is risen, so go, and tell the twelve.

Instead, the women flee in fright, telling no one.

At which point, Mark says: "The End."

In Mark's Gospel, Jesus is forever telling those he cures to say nothing.

He admonishes his disciples not to proclaim him Messiah, he insists in the secrecy of his ultimate mission, in his ultimate identity.

That's Mark.

In the very first chapter of Mark, where we find ourselves this morning, Jesus appears, seemingly out of nowhere.

He presents himself to John in the Jordan for baptism.

The sky is torn open and a wild bird plops onto his shoulder.

He is driven into the desert by the same Holy Spirit that now consumes him.

Emerging from that desert many days later; he gathers the first of the twelve disciples and promptly finds himself in the

synagogue, the Jewish church, confronting a man possessed by an unclean spirit.

The pace in Mark is at full sprint.

I'm getting tired just telling you!

Mark's favorite word is "immediately."

He uses it repeatedly to keep the galloping pace that continues throughout his remarkable story of this strange man from Galilee.

We don't know what Jesus is teaching them in the synagogue today.

Mark isn't telling us.

All we know is that Jesus is amazing them with a teaching that is to its core authentic.

No mealy mouthed clergy hemming and hawing, excusing and justifying.

Something in what Jesus is saying draws inexorably out of every person a Yes or a No.

Preston's favorite theologian Karl Barth says "And if the answer is Yes, it means a resolute redirection and conversion of the whole person." Barth, IV.2.Church Dogmatics, 157.

If the answer is No, then you need to do everything you can to stop this Jesus, so you can get your people back in line.

It is the same choice that Jesus confronts us with today:

What is your response?

What is mine?

And there is this: what about that fellow possessed by the evil spirit?

No doubt he's a problem for folks like us.

My oldest daughter, Elaine, is a clinical psychologist, and my guess is that at the first mention of possession by evil spirits, she's whipping out her DSM IV to accurately size up the precise mental illness afflicting the poor sot.

And yet I wonder if we should be so quick to dismiss spirit possession.

Who among us, after all, hasn't been possessed by evil spirits?

I ask again: haven't we each of us been possessed by evil spirits in the course of our lives?

Who among us has escaped the assault on calm thinking, on kindness, on compassion, when overcome by the spirit of jealousy or the spirit of envy or the spirits of greed, lust, anger or pride?

These spirits invade our lives, often with a regularity that is painful to acknowledge.

They lead us into actions that are deeply regretted, shamefully recalled, bitterly remembered.

And these are not the only spirits with which we must contend.

There are spirits that infest our institutions and collective consciousness:

Spirits that demand an eye for an eye.

Spirits that justify the grotesque accumulation of wealth by a few when the vast majority of fellow human beings live in dire need.

Spirits of demagoguery and fear, provoked to keep the few in positions of power.

These are the powers and principalities that St. Paul so often confronts; spirits that blind all of us to the life God intends for us on this earth.

And in his very first chapter, Mark tells us that in Jesus, we have a redeemer who is stronger than any of those spirits, a friend who is always ready to free us from their snares.

“Christ has come to shatter the domineering designs that shackle people to lower standards of life than God intends.

Christ has come to free us from the demons of prejudice and pride, greed and guile.

Christ is among us, whenever we gather as the church, to demonstrate that saving power among us.

If we devote ourselves to anything less than a divinely directed destiny, we have missed the goal of faith.” D. Lose.

“What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth?”

Isn't that our question, here, in the early twenty-first century?

At once it seems the whole world is subject to our control, yet at the same time, everything seems to be slipping away?

Will the Euro fail?

Will our economy recover?

How can we find that sense of fellowship that once seemed to define Hawai'i?

“What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth?”

In the weeks to come, Mark hurries us along to sit with Jesus as he invites tax collectors and prostitutes to dine with him.

He welcomes people whom no self-respecting holy man would ever welcome.

And in that welcoming, he gently whispers that the sin is not in being possessed by spirits; the sin is refusing to acknowledge that we are.

By gathering all of us who are sick and in need and rotten and self-righteous, the tearing open of the heavens over the Jordan begins the banquet promised so long ago by the prophet Isaiah:

On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples
a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines,
of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear.

And he will destroy on this mountain
the shroud that is cast over all peoples,
the sheet that is spread over all nations;
he will swallow up death forever.

Then the Lord God will wipe away the tears from all faces,
and the disgrace of his people he will take away from all
the earth,

for the Lord has spoken. (Isa. 25:6-8)

It is a banquet, open to all who are willing to sit down with all.

It is a banquet made possible by what Archbishop Desmond Tutu calls the “wonderfully low standards of Jesus.”

Just as it is with Jesus, it is the walk, not the talk, that most matters to Mark.

And for us today, gathered as we are, with our annual meeting to immediately follow our service (all doors will be bolted and sealed), it is for us a chance to reflect on how, over this past year, our walk has matched our talk.

I encourage each of you to read through the reports of those in leadership positions, from Sunday School to Altar Guild, from HCAP to Sr. Warden.

And I must say, as your Rector, as your friend, that there is much in our common life together for which we all of us, and all together, can gratefully say: thank you.

Thank you Lord for the opportunity to serve so many of the neediest in our neighborhood.

Thank you Lord for opening our hearts and minds and yes, our wallets too, as we partake in the wonderful work of building up your kingdom.

Thank you for our elders who bring to us so much wisdom and experience and deep commitment to the life and ministry of this church.

Thank you for our children and young adults, for they are the future of this church.

And if the pace of the ministry at St E's sometimes seems breathless, perhaps we can take heart that in Mark, we have a brother.

A brother, who reminds us that the good news of Jesus Christ is urgent news for a anxious world; news we are compelled to announce, news we are compelled to live!

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