

1-28-18 Sermon – “Spirits on the Loose!” – Mark 1:21-28

In Gospel reading this morning, we hear the story of Jesus’ first public actions, his ministry “debut” in Mark’s Gospel. He enters a synagogue, casts out a demon, and all the people are utterly amazed. Watch out people; there are spirits on the loose!

Perhaps we shouldn’t be surprised to see evil spirits showing up on Jesus’ first day of ministry; this is *Mark’s* Gospel, after all. Each of the four Gospel writers approaches Jesus’ life and ministry from a different angle. And for those of us who are more familiar with Matthew, John, or Luke, Mark’s Gospel can be a little hard to get into.

Compared to the well-polished narratives of Matthew or Luke, or the rich theological discourses in John, Mark’s gospel is short, and sparse, and abrupt. It’s choppy, almost breathless, rough around the edges. For that matter, the Jesus we meet in Mark’s Gospel is a little rough around the edges himself. Mark’s Jesus is terse; there’s always this sense of urgency driving him. To be honest, he’s not always portrayed as particularly compassionate, as we may tend to think of our Savior.

While John’s Jesus says, “I am the Good Shepherd,” and Matthew’s Jesus invites us, “Come to me, all you who are weary and carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest,” Mark’s Jesus is more the type to say, “Get up! Let’s get to work! For the Kingdom of God is near.” Mark’s Jesus has one purpose, and that is to get this ‘Kingdom of God’ thing started.

Case in point: in today’s text, Jesus begins his public ministry by teaching in the synagogue. And the people are *astounded* by Jesus’ teaching, for he taught them as one having authority. Sounds like a pretty powerful sermon to me, but Mark doesn’t even stop to tell us what it was about! Instead, he charges forward to tell us how Jesus is met by a man with an unclean spirit, and with no more than a word, Jesus casts that spirit out of him. And once again, the people are amazed by Jesus’ authority.

This is what Mark wants us to know about Jesus: that he is the Messiah, endowed with the authority of God. The people recognize Jesus’ authority because everything about him, his very *being*, embodies the Kingdom of God. Embodies – for Jesus is literally God’s Kingdom in a body.

The message of Jesus’ teaching is who he is, and what he does. Mark’s Jesus teaches us that God is breaking into the world by coming into the world himself. He doesn’t waste time proclaiming victory over death; he goes straight to the cross and conquers death by dying and rising from the grave. Mark’s Jesus doesn’t *tell* us that he is the Light of the World; he simply casts out all forces of darkness and leaves it to us to see the light.

Jesus casts out a demon, and all who see it recognize that he does so with authority. For in Jesus Christ, the untamed power of the Kingdom of God has broken into history and been set free in the world. Watch out friends, for there are spirits on the loose.

We Presbyterians don’t talk too much about these more charismatic concepts of demons and ‘spiritual warfare.’ I imagine this is the case because we’re not quite sure what – if anything – we believe about good and evil spirits. We know that the gospels were written two thousand years ago, before the dawn of modern medicine. And we’re not sure we have much use for this concept of ‘spirits’ anymore.

From a scientific perspective, I think that makes sense. We live in a post-Enlightenment world; we know about the effects of germs, and misfiring neurotransmitters, and the like. But from a theological perspective, even a *spiritual* perspective, I wonder if we might be selling ourselves short.

For make no mistake: In Mark's Gospel, there are spirits on the loose. This Gospel is unapologetically apocalyptic. It tells the story of Jesus Christ as a story of cosmic warfare – between the power of God and the powers of evil – worked out in the realm of human history.

When Jesus is baptized by John in the River Jordan, Mark describes how the heavens are torn apart, and the Spirit of God descends upon Jesus like a dove. For Mark and his first readers, it is an accepted truth that demons and the powers of evil have been loose in the world since the beginning of time. But in Jesus Christ, a new kind of spirit has entered the realm of history: The Holy Spirit, the Spirit of the Living God.

When Jesus enters that synagogue in Capernaum, when he silences and casts out the demon, the people recognize Jesus' authority. They recognize that this new spirit on the loose in the person of Jesus Christ is a different kind of spirit. They recognize that the Kingdom of God has at last broken into history, and has begun to cast out all other powers and principalities. They see the Spirit of God at work, breaking every power of evil and oppression and injustice, so that before the cross of Jesus Christ no demon can stand.

Maybe all this talk of demons and spiritual warfare is nonsense. An antiquated worldview to put behind us, thank you very much. Superstitions that don't reflect well on modern, well-educated Presbyterians.

Maybe. Or maybe these demons on the loose make a bit more theological sense than we'd like to admit. Maybe we've even seen some of these demons – these evil spirits – rearing their ugly heads. What might a demon look like today? How might we recognize a spirit that is fundamentally opposed to the love of God, if we saw one in our midst?

Would we recognize the demon of violence? Of constant warfare raging around the world? Of the epidemic of gun violence in our own nation? Of daily headlines that read "Deadly blast rocks Kabul: 95 dead, 158 wounded." Or "January 23rd, School Shooting in Kentucky kills two students; is *eleventh* school shooting of 2018."

Perhaps we might recognize the demon of poverty. Of a world where the rich keep getting richer, and the poor keep getting poorer, and ne'er the two shall meet. Of children from Yemen to Syria to right here in Taos who don't have enough food to eat to develop normally and live a healthy life.

Maybe we've seen the twin demons of racism and xenophobia. Those demons that fatally distort Jesus' command to love our neighbors as ourselves, and teach us instead to love only our neighbors who look like us. Demons that tell us we have permission to turn our backs on our neighbors who don't speak the same language, or whose customs we don't understand, or neighbors who talk about God differently than we do.

I wonder if the demon that particularly plagues our age might not be the demon of supremacy. Of white supremacy, American supremacy, supremacy based on gender or sexuality, on wealth or education, on religion or social status or political affiliation. The demon of supremacy that manifests itself in *any* belief, ideology, or behavior that allows us to say to another child of God, "I am more human than you." The demon of supremacy that spits in the face of our God whose love and grace extend to *all* of his creatures.

Friends, if I understand the text, I think that Mark may be on to something. As strange and fantastical as his worldview may sound to us, we *do* live in a world at war between the cosmic powers of good – of God – and of evil. Spirits are, indeed, on the loose. And as that cosmic battle rages, Mark asks us to choose which side we're on.

If we who claim to be people of the Gospel choose the side of Jesus, then we've got some marching orders. Jesus casts out demons, and so his disciples are called to do the same. Just a

few chapters later in Mark's Gospel, when Jesus commissions his disciples, he gives them – gives *us* – the authority to proclaim his Gospel and cast out demons in his name.

But how on earth is a twenty-first century disciple supposed to cast out demons? How do we claim a power we can't even begin to understand?

I think it's telling, going back to our text this morning, that when Jesus casts the spirit out of the man in the synagogue, all he does is speak. No magic tricks, no gimmicks. All it takes to cast out the powers of evil is a word. Jesus is, after all, the Word of God. The Word who became flesh and dwelt among us.

What do you think might happen if we followed Jesus' example? What would it look like if we started using our own words to call out the powers of evil in this world? If we cast out demons by calling them by their names? Racism...poverty...xenophobia...greed. What if we were to say, "I recognize you, demon of violence, demon of supremacy! And in the name of Jesus Christ, I condemn you! I call you what you are; you are evil! And with the authority of the Kingdom of God, I say to you, come out of us and be gone!"

The spirits of evil are indeed loose in the world. But so, my friends, is the Spirit of God. Empowered by that Spirit, we the church are sent forth to announce the coming defeat of everything that stands against the Kingdom of God. Or as the famous reformer Martin Luther put it 500 years ago:

*"The Prince of Darkness grim, we tremble not for him;
His rage we can endure, for lo! his doom is sure.
One little Word shall fell him."*

Indeed, Jesus Christ, the Word made Flesh, *will* fell all that is evil in this world. Thanks be to God. Amen.