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Mark 1:21-28

SPIRIT POSSESSION

If you are looking for a comforting, soothing Jesus, I don't recommend turning to the Gospel of Mark. Mark gives us a confrontational Jesus. That's probably not how a lot of us imagine Jesus. We often think of Jesus as a mild-mannered and gentle guy. We sing songs about his sweet love and kindness. This kind of Jesus is easy for us to swallow. But Mark gives us a radically different image of Jesus—and a Jesus who does not always make us feel comfortable. The entire Gospel of Mark depicts Jesus engaged in a series of confrontations and conflicts which keep escalating right up to the climactic moment of the crucifixion. Mark offers us a Jesus who is engaged in a ministry of conflict with the forces that bring death and brokenness to us as individuals and to us collectively as a people. Jesus is still the man of love, but what we discover in Mark's gospel is a different understanding of what love looks like.

Our scripture passage today takes place at the very start of Jesus' public ministry. But right out of the gate, Jesus gets involved in a conflict. A man with an unclean spirit enters the synagogue where Jesus is teaching. Our translation today states that the man was possessed by an "unclean spirit" but other translations use the word "demon." Jesus and this unclean spirit have a confrontation. And Jesus then performs what we would call an exorcism. Jesus rebukes the unclean spirit and drives it out of the man.

This kind of story does not sit comfortably with many of us modern Christians. Some of us may not believe in the existence of demons. Much of what ancient people referred to as demon-possession we today would understand as mental illness. But whether you believe in

actual demonic creatures or not, it is abundantly clear from our lives and in our world that there are indeed dangerous, destructive, and unhealthy spirits that possess us individually as well as collectively. All we have to do is witness the videos of the January 6th attack on the U.S. Capitol building, and to recall the racist signs, the hateful speech, and the violent actions to know that dangerous and destructive spirits inhabit us. We don't have to believe in the existence of demonic creatures to accept the reality that we humans are possessed by a variety of unclean spirits.

Unclean spirits surface in racism and hatred of others—but they also possess us when insecurities and fears cause us to turn from others in need or cling tightly to our money. Unclean spirits drive us to fill our emptiness with over-eating and over-drinking and over-spending. We are possessed by unclean spirits when we accept national policies that benefit the privileged while ignoring the weak and voiceless. Unclean spirits are shape-shifters, taking many forms and shapes over time. Think about the many shapes racism has taken over the generations—from the existence of slavery to the more subtle but systemic forms of discrimination in housing and employment. All the many kinds of unclean spirits share this in common: they keep us from knowing the abundant life God intends for us.

Mark tells us that Jesus rebukes the unclean spirit possessing the man in our story. That word “rebuke” is interesting when you think about it. To “rebuke” clearly involves criticism. To “rebuke” does contain an element of judgment. But to “rebuke” is not the same as to “reject.” To “rebuke” still includes within its underlying meaning the existence of a relationship. To rebuke another person is to declare, “I’m not ok leaving you the way you are.” To rebuke is to call forth change.

Jesus is not ok leaving us the way we are. That is why we see in Mark a confrontational Jesus. I can't imagine any of us enjoy conflict or confrontation. What most of us seek in our lives and in our world is peace. We want peace in our homes. We want peace in our neighborhoods and in our communities. We want peace in our nation and in our world. We want inner peace in our hearts and minds.

But what kind of peace do we really seek? Sometimes we settle for an imitation of peace, where everything on the surface looks nice. Meanwhile, beneath the surface lies brokenness. We say we want peace among the races in our nation. But what kind of peace do we really mean? Are we talking about a false peace that comes when those who suffer discrimination and injustice are encouraged to remain silent and accepting of their plight? Or are we talking about a genuine peace that comes with the hard work of confronting what is inherently wrong and oppressive within our institutions and policies, and even within our own hearts?

In this unsettled world, in these difficult times, we want inner peace. But is it a simple, easy peace that asks nothing of us, a peace we seek to acquire with through our next Amazon purchase or through the growth of our retirement fund? Or will we seek a peace that involves dealing with our unclean spirits of anger, resentment, addiction, or consumerism?

The peace Jesus seeks for us comes through confronting the unclean spirits in our lives—because that is what will ensure lasting, genuine peace for all people. Jesus rebukes the unclean spirits within us and among us but he never rejects us. He confronts in order to heal. We often hear the phrase, “Jesus saves.” It is interesting to know that the word *salvation* comes from the Latin word *salvus*, which means “health.” Jesus confronts the unclean spirits in our lives and in our world in order to bring us health, in order to save.

The conflict Jesus has with this man in the synagogue sets the tone for the entire gospel. It sets a tone of a fierce kind of love that will not let us succumb to the death-dealing spirits that possess us. Jesus loves us too fiercely to be that sweet, gauzy kind of man we sometimes see depicted in paintings or in movies. Jesus will not leave us as we are in our states of brokenness for he wants nothing less than full, abundant life for every one of us. His ministry is confrontational because he loves us and he knows and believes in what we can become we are possessed by the spirit of Christ.