

AND THE PEOPLE WERE AMAZED

A sermon preached by the Rev. Aaron Billard
St. John's United Church, Moncton, NB
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Mark 1:21-28

- 1:21 They went to Capernaum; and when the Sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught.
- 1:22 They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes.
- 1:23 Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit,
- 1:24 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."
- 1:25 But Jesus rebuked him, saying, "Be silent, and come out of him!"
- 1:26 And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him.
- 1:27 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."
- 1:28 At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.

Most ministers, if they were being honest, all have a story of a parishioner who confronted them after church, just like the possessed man confronting Jesus in the synagogue. When it has happened to me, it's usually an angry confrontation about something I've said or done, or not said or not done. So if you ever see me point at you and hear me say, "Be silent, and come out of

him!" you'll know what I'm thinking.

And if I'm going to be completely honest with you, I don't believe in demons. In religious traditions that support their existence, I've found that quite often demons are used to explain away bad behaviour and to be blamed for something someone else did, or they are used to explain a situation beyond someone's control. The closer someone is to you who believes something, the more likely you are to believe it. Our beliefs aren't formed by researchers; our beliefs are formed by our experiences and the people in our inner circle. And while I don't literally believe in demons, it does take a person long in the week to see that in many ways they do exist, just as they did in Jesus' time. Usually they take the form of people who need to be liberated from something beyond their control. It's about having and living a full life in a society that won't let them. The things that hold us back from following, from living, and sometimes even breathing, as we feel so weighed down by the very thing that has us in its grip.

I'll never forget the first time I visited the hospital's mental health unit where I was taken beyond two sets of security doors and into an inner sanctum reserved for those who are in particular need and distress. On my way in to see a parishioner, a man behind a closed door with a window charged the door, his face against it, and yelling the question, "Are you a priest?" It was the ferociousness of it. It's that kind of experience Mark is describing for us today as Jesus teaches as "one having authority." Authority at the time was usually given to temple leaders who could quote other Rabbis; and it was given to Jesus because of his ability to make it happen. When the possessed man confronts Jesus in the temple, he names him as the Holy One of God, and Jesus commands the spirit to leave the man. And the people are amazed.

You know how they say that the best church meetings are the ones held outside in the parking lot? Well it was true then too, and word begins to spread about who this Jesus is. It was a common way of telling stories in which the demon attempts to gain control over Jesus by naming him. But it doesn't work. And everyone left that day, changed by what they heard and saw.

These are powerful forces at work. They are naming things in Jesus that he doesn't want other people to know. And I think that this particular text situated at the beginning of Mark's Gospel is part of what makes Mark an un-paralleled story teller. Before we know what's going on, it is over. And with that, the dust settles and only then do we see what happened. In a snap, Jesus has been confronted in a holy place by something that seeks to have power over him, and in front of a crowd he finds it within himself to pour light into that place, and in so doing, someone is set free.

There's another reason I think this text is a radical one in our lives, if we stop for a moment and pay attention to it. I know for a fact that you all know what it means to have an unclear spirit. It's that part of ourselves that we are deeply ashamed of, or a part of ourselves that we hate, or a part of ourselves that we have been taught to call "ugly," or a part of ourselves that has such a control over who we are and what we do that we are powerless before it. And it's something that you bring with you wherever you go, even to church. It's a part of yourself that you aren't proud of. I think it means different things to different people too. And I think it can work both ways: either it is something within us that needs to change, or there is something within us that society, or a person, has made you feel guilty and ashamed of.

We all carry hurt, and we all carry pain. Some have been able to manage it and to live their lives as best as they are able. Others are

able to compartmentalize such things and to deal with them in bits and pieces. And still others are broken by it and cannot function well. I read a few weeks ago that some of us carry our brokenness on the inside, and some of us wear it on the outside, but we are all broken.

Yet that's how the light gets in. I believe that as much as I believe anything. There is nothing quite like the connection of holding the hand of someone who has been dealt a devastating blow by life; and there is nothing quite like someone holding your hand when you have been on the receiving end of some very bad news. The other day I wrote a prayer that said, "For those no longer afraid of what tomorrow might bring because yesterday brought it, Lord have mercy."

So while this story may seem to be strange to our Western modern ears as it was told to people of 1st century Palestine, who believed literally in such things, today I submit to all of you that this experience is real enough that there are things that cause us to be afraid in life, and there are things that try to hold power over us. It's just the way it is.

But that's why we're here. We're not here because Jesus was a nice teacher who did nice things. We're here because he is the Christ who reaches into our darkness and shows us light. We're here because we believe in the healing power of hope; we are here because Christ taught us not to fear death, but to see it as something that draws us closer to eternity. We're here because of stories like these in which Jesus is able to speak to that part of ourselves that causes such conflict in our lives, and he says to it, "Be silent." And then he calls it to come out of us.

A friend of mine sometimes says, "God doesn't exist, God insists." I like that. God is an Event which comes upon us completely without

our control. God is “always transformative and always outside our grasp. We can't grab it and hold it under a microscope and examine it. When the God comes into contact with us, it is often experienced as disruptive.”

Which is precisely why I like the imagery of what happens when Jesus commands the demon to leave the man - he convulses and cries out with a loud voice. When this man was confronted with the truth, all that was dead within him poured out of him. He understood things in a different way.

And we go all week long carry things inside. The quote from Plato comes to mind, "Be kind, for everyone you meet is fighting a hard battle." I remember these moments when I read, "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom."

I know an author by the name of Carol Howard Merritt, who is a Presbyterian minister in the United States. She wrote a great book called, "Tribal Church" in which she talks about ministering to the missing generation of church. She writes in a blog,

“I remember these moments when I read, ‘The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.’ The words make me wince. I grew up as a conservative evangelical where I heard this verse constantly. God had teeth. Fear and trembling were the appropriate response to God's presence. I lived with a palpable sense that I was a sinner in the hands of an angry God that must be feared. As I grew older and my faith changed, I learned to interpret the word for "fear" in different ways - awe, respect, or reverence. After all, neurologists tell us that imagining an angry, vengeful God can make us angry, vengeful people.”

Part of our ministry at St. John's is to help people paint a new picture of Christ, one that isn't crafted by Hallmark or even by the

begging for your money on television each Sunday. The Christ we preach in this church is the one who lifts you up, not puts you down. The Christ we preach in this church is the one who gives you life, not takes it away. So often, at the core of who we are, we believe in a punitive God whose only real purpose for existence is to catch us or to keep track of what we've done wrong; and sadly that's been programmed into us by society and by those who seem to shout the loudest about religion.

Yet I'm here to tell you this morning about a God of grace, a God of blessing, a God whose presence in our lives tells us that when we are most blind, most unable to see the goodness in our lives, that deep dark moment gives us a sight and a clarity about our lives that sometimes we would rather not have. Those for me are born again moments. The moments when I realize that I really have not been what I was meant to be. And we move on.

Part of our experience as a church is to wonder what it is that our community isn't seeing in the world around us. And sometimes it means that we as a group of Christians have to help the world see that sometimes it is not all about money, it isn't all about achieving your personal dreams, it isn't all about "me," in fact it's quite the opposite. It's all about other people, and creating a world safe enough and sustainable enough for all of us to live.

Sometimes we think of authority and it brings up a mixed message. There is a story about a premier of Nova Scotia who was working hard at getting re-elected. One day, after a busy afternoon knocking on doors (and no lunch), he arrived at a church barbecue. It was late afternoon and he was famished. As he moved down the serving line, he held out his plate to the woman serving chicken. She put a piece on his plate and turned to the next person in line. "Excuse me," the premier said, "do you mind if I have another piece of chicken?"

"Sorry," the woman told him, "I'm supposed to give one piece of chicken to each person." "But I'm starved" the Premier said. "Sorry," the woman said again, "only one to a customer." By all accounts the premier was a modest and unassuming man, but he decided that this time he would throw a little weight around. "Do you know who I am?" he asked. "I am the Premier of Nova Scotia." "Do you know who I am?" the woman asked. "I'm the lady in charge of the chicken. Move along."

Jesus is interrupted in the temple, just as our week is filled with things that seek to hold power over us. We meet Jesus again in this place, and we are made clean because we are reminded that Christ casts out those things in our lives that seek have dominion over us, and instead he replaces it with faith and hope and life. Christ replaces fear with faith - because he has authority over those things.

One of my favourite stories is the one about the two people who recited the 23rd Psalm. One was a well-known actor, the other an old and rather unsophisticated minister. The actor's rendering of the psalm was beautiful and commanding. Everyone enjoyed hearing the rich words of the beloved Psalm spoken in his clear baritone. All the inflections and pauses were perfect.

Then the old minister spoke. She stammered a bit and the words were broken with unnatural punctuations of silence. But when she finished there were tears in the eyes of the listeners. Something had happened, and it was the actor who gave the interpretation: "I know the Psalm," he said, "but this woman knows the shepherd."

That is the difference authority makes.
