

## The Exorcist in the Synagogue

Mark 1:21-28

*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!" (Mark 1:23-15)*

When was the last time an uninvited stranger walked into your church and took over the pulpit? How many exorcisms have you witnessed in the last month? How often do you spend Sabbath afternoons debriefing miracles? In this story from the Gospel of Mark, Jesus enters a synagogue, teaches with authority, astounds his listeners, casts out an unclean spirit, and becomes famous throughout the land. Can you relate?

Let's face it: this story is a tough one. How might we imagine our way into it? Can we picture ourselves as members of the ancient audience which hears Jesus speak? Can we align ourselves with the man possessed by the unclean spirit? Can we experience the story through Jesus's eyes? Each of these role plays will pierce us in different ways, so let's imagine:

*The audience.* We don't know their names, ages, or backstories. All we know is that they show up in the synagogue on the Sabbath, listen to Jesus teach, and find themselves astounded and amazed. I had to read the story half a dozen times before I realized something: I can't relate to these people. I can't remember the last time I was "astounded" and "amazed" by Jesus. Can you?

According to Mark, the people who hear Jesus in the synagogue are amazed because he comes with "a new teaching" and teaches "as one having authority" (Mark 1:21-28). The implication, of course, is that Jesus's audience is receptive to newness. Open to wonder. Am I? Do I approach my spiritual life with curiosity or boredom? Do I sit in the pew on Sunday mornings wanting to contend with something new? Or do I expect to be coddled and commended?

These are especially hard questions to ask ourselves if we've been Christians for a long time. The new becomes old. The fresh becomes familiar. The heart hunkers down for an unvarying long haul, and we forget that Jesus comes to make all things new. The audience in Mark's Gospel is "amazed and astounded" by the work of God because they allow Jesus to be unfamiliar in their midst. This need not be the anomaly. It *shouldn't* be. Jesus is amazing when we allow him to be. Amazement is the birthright of God's children.

*The man with the unclean spirit.* I'll get the obvious out of the way and admit that I have no idea what the "spirit" is in this story. Some commentaries recast the demon as a mental illness or a medical condition like epilepsy. Others insist on it being an actual spirit, a malevolent being that ensnares human souls. Still others argue that spirits in the New Testament are metaphors for anything that might "possess" or "control" us—anger, fear, lust, greed, hatred, envy.

I don't know which one of these explanations is true, and I'm not sure it matters. When I try to imagine my way into the life of the man with the unclean spirit, what disturbs me is not "who" or "what" the spirit is, but how utterly it ravages the poor man whose body and mind it possesses. The man has no voice of his own; the spirit speaks for him. The man has no control over his body; the spirit convulses him. The man has no community; the spirit isolates him. The man has no dignity; the spirit dehumanizes him.

Granted, this picture of "possession" is extreme. But all of us suffer under the bondage of "spirits" that diminish us. All of us know what it's like to lose agency and dignity to forces too powerful for us to defeat on our own. All of us know what it's like to cede control to demons that makes our lives unmanageable. Whether we regard such forces as spiritual, psychological, biological, or cultural, this story tells us true things about how "unclean spirits" affect and manipulate our lives.

In Mark's story, the unclean spirit goes to the synagogue and listens to Jesus. It recognizes "the Holy One of God" before anyone else does. It calculates the stakes, realizes that Jesus's presence signals its doom, and puts up a vicious fight before it surrenders.

Does any of this sound familiar? Sometimes our "unclean spirits" take up residence in our holy places. We carry our destructive habits and tendencies right into our churches, our friendships, our families, and our workplaces. Sometimes our demons—our fears, addictions, sins, and compulsions—recognize Jesus first because they know that an encounter with the holy will change everything. They make us recoil as soon as Jesus shows up in the guise of a loving friend or a provocative sermon or a wise book or a pricked conscience. Sometimes our lives actually get *harder*

when we move towards healing, because unclean spirits always fight hardest when their time is up.

What possesses us? What wreaks havoc in our hearts and minds? What distorts our humanity? These forces might not leave our lives without a fight, but the Jesus of Mark's Gospel will do battle for us if we'll let him. Will we?

*Jesus.* Mark never tells us what Jesus teaches his audience that day. All we know is that he enters the temple, speaks with an authority his listeners find astonishing, and underscores that authority with an exorcism. Is this a character we can even approach, much less emulate?

I think the story offers a couple of plausible takeaways. First, Jesus doesn't use his authority to self-aggrandize or to consolidate power. He uses it only to heal, free, serve, and empower those around him. Maybe this is precisely why his audience finds him so compelling; his is the authority of a servant king. He has no political power. No earthly throne or kingdom to speak of. But he has an integrity that is irresistible.

Second, Jesus steps directly into the pain, rage, ugliness, and horror at the heart of this story. He isn't squeamish and he doesn't flinch. His brand of holiness doesn't require him to keep his hands clean. He is *in* the fear, in the sickness, in the nightmare, ready to engage anything that diminishes the lives of those he loves.

Yes, he preaches with great effectiveness to the faithful, but he also speaks the unclean spirit's language, listens to its cries, and rebukes it for the sake of a broken man's health and sanity. Consider the question the spirit asks: "What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth?" There's only one answer: "Everything. I have *everything* to do with you." Wherever pain is, darkness is, torment is, *God is*. God has everything to do with us, even and maybe especially when we're at our worst.

May we, like the audience in the synagogue, recover holy amazement. May we, like the man with the unclean spirit, fight our way towards freedom. And may we, like Jesus, speak words of love and healing into the world's pain.