

28 January 2024

Unclean Spirits

Mark 1:21-28

After calling disciples, Jesus immediately set about his public ministry, teaching in synagogues throughout Galilee. And also doing mighty works. We read Mark 1, verses 21-28.

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

This year the lectionary gospel readings are mostly taken from the book of Mark, and since we're going to spending a lot of time in Mark, we might as well get this out of the way early: let's talk about demons. Mark do love him some demon exorcisms. We, however, don't. This is one of those places where our worldview and that of biblical writers really bang heads. In basically every ancient culture, the world was seen as being inhabited by spirits, beings of a different kind of reality than the material world, but still able to affect our reality. One of the ways that happened was that evil spirits sometimes inhabited humans, changing their personalities and making them unrecognizable. In our post-Enlightenment, scientific worldview, however, a great many of the things that used to appear to be the work of spirits have now been explained as natural phenomena, following the same rules as everything else. So, whereas in the ancient world, the default explanation of something mysterious was that a spirit was at work; in our world, the default explanation of something mysterious is going to be something scientific. Indeed, for many in our world, this default setting has been taken to be absolute. That is, that there is no reality beyond this material world. If it can't be measured or explained by science, it doesn't exist.

You see how those two worldviews might have some friction in a story of Jesus casting out a demon. The story that was told under one worldview is now being read under a completely different set of presuppositions. So what do we do with stories like this? Let me give you two extreme options. First, there's the biblical literalist option, which holds as an article of faith that everything in the Bible is historically and scientifically accurate, and so we must accept the story as told. This was a demon, a spirit from another realm. End of question. This is so because I believe it is so. At the other extreme is the pure scientific materialist response, which is to explain *all* such stories away as perfectly natural phenomena that the primitive, pre-scientific minds of the biblical writers simply didn't understand. End of question. There can be no such thing as spirits from a different realm, because there is no different realm. This is so because I believe it is so.

Speaking for myself, I am not particularly drawn to either fundamentalism. On the one hand, it seems abundantly clear that many of the "demon" stories of the New Testament describe

natural conditions we now understand better. In Mark 9, for instance, we meet a “demon-possessed” boy whose symptoms Mark describes in detail, and he couldn’t describe epilepsy more clearly if he were working from a diagnostic manual. So, no. We don’t have to turn off our minds and ignore modern science as we read the Bible. On the other hand, I also don’t want to slam the door on the possibility that there are phenomena beyond the realm of science. Some of those beyond-science things, after all, are central to my faith: that there is a God, that that God became a human being, and that in that human form that God died a human death and rose again. So I already believe some things from a realm beyond science; having opened that door, I don’t think I get to decide how many other things might exist beyond science. I believe in the Holy Spirit; could there be other spirits? Maybe.

But in another sense, how you understand New Testament “demons” matters less than whether we are looking for the meaning behind the story. As we work through Mark this year, feel free to deal with the demon stories however you’re most comfortable: explain them as disease or mental illness if you wish or take them at face value if you choose. Just don’t stop there, because the message of these stories does not depend on that choice. And that message comes in two parts. First, evil is real. And powerful. And scary.

Put yourself in that synagogue where Jesus cast out the demon. What you see is a man – probably someone from your village whom you used to know – who interrupts Jesus’ teaching with rage. The man speaks as if he were someone else. In fact, he speaks as if he were multiple people: *Have you come to destroy us?* This man had somehow lost his own personhood, so that when he spoke, he spoke in a voice of personified anger. Does that sound familiar? Have you ever known anyone who seems to have lost their own personhood, being possessed by something that has twisted them into something else? Yes, it can happen in some forms of mental illness. Yes, it can happen through addictions. And yes, it can happen in society.

Consider the example of Nazi Germany. I don’t mean Hitler and Himmler and Goering and the other inner circle leaders. I mean the millions of good Lutheran and Catholic German people who went along with them. The horror of that time, for me, is not so much the evil masterminds at the top but the ordinary people who turned in their Jewish neighbors to the Gestapo, who raised up their children to hate those who were different. Not the monsters who designed and ran the death camps, but the local villagers who took jobs there as cooks or office workers and looked the other way. What happened to those people? How did an entire nation become possessed by evil? How did they collectively, become sociopaths in the space of a generation?

In our comfortable liberal mainline church world, we have often downplayed the reality of evil. One of the first things I noticed upon joining the Methodists was that no one ever said the word “sin.” It seems to be a four-letter word. Instead we use gentle, non-judgmental euphemisms like “falling short” or “missing the mark” or “doing less than our best” or “making bad choices.” And I get that. I understand why we’d want to do that. If that’s all that evil is – “not being our best self” – then it’s controllable. We can make better choices tomorrow. But Naziism was not just “falling short of the mark”: it was evil. It was sickness, it was madness, it was demonic. There is such a thing as evil that goes beyond rational explanation. Ask the people of Ukraine, of Gaza, of Israel, of Sudan, of Yemen, of Afghanistan, of Myanmar, and yes of the United States. Because here too are people whose old selves have been transformed into something harsh and unrecognizable. Here too are people who no longer speak in their own voices but in the voices of personified rage. We don’t speak of them as being possessed by unclean spirits; we say they’ve

been “radicalized.” Either way, it’s real. Do what you want with these demon-possession stories, but in the end they speak of uncontrolled, transforming evil, and that story is still true.

But there’s a second lesson from Mark’s demon stories. Christ is stronger than the demon. Christ confronts the evil, rebukes it, and it leaves. The formerly possessed person is restored. I love the way it’s described in another one of Mark’s stories. Once the demons had been expelled, the healed man sits with Jesus “clothed and in his right mind.” There is no evil that cannot be cast out by the encounter with Christ, or even with someone who faithfully represents Christ. It’s not a magic thing, though: it’s an encounter. It’s always an encounter. I presume that Jesus had the power to just say the word and heal every leper and cast out every demon in Judea, but he never did. Every healing was one-on-one. And the same is true for us as we confront evil.

Have you read about Daryl Davis? He’s the black jazz pianist who met a KKK member in a bar where he was playing and instead of yelling at him, made friends instead. Eventually his friend left the Klan, but before he did, he gave Daryl some more names. Since then Daryl has made friends with dozens of Klansmen, refusing to speak in anger, and basically making it impossible for them to hold on to the evil ideology that had once possessed them. Driven by his Christian faith, and by a love that is beyond rational explanation, Daryl has a collection of some twenty-five Klan robes that friends have given him when they decided they would never wear them again. Those friends, you could say, are now unrobed and in their right minds.

When dealing with Mark’s stories of demon-possession and exorcism, I recommend a certain degree of skepticism, but ultimately I don’t care what you think about the literal or historical accuracy of those stories. Just don’t throw out the meat with the shell, because there’s something important there. There *are* unclean spirits in this world – ideologies of hate, dehumanizing of other children of God, flames of fear and loathing kindled by ideologues of all types – and these unclean spirits can spread in ways that cannot be fully explained. We have seen them possess whole nations. Evil is real. And scary. But Christ is stronger than the demons. In the encounter with the Spirit of Christ, no other spirit can stand.

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Today I’ve spoken of both the Holy Spirit and of unclean spirits. Here’s a general rule to use when trying to discern which is which. Someone possessed by an unclean spirit becomes generic, like everyone else in their group. Those possessed by the Holy Spirit becomes more truly and fully themselves. This week, may the Spirit of God fill you, that you may indeed be more fully you. Amen.