

February 5th, 2012

5th Sunday after Epiphany

Mark 1:21-28

“Possessed”

the Rev. Michelle Slater

There is nothing like a miraculous healing story in the Bible, like the story we hear from Mark’s gospel this morning, to really point out how different our assumptions are today, from those found in the ancient world. In our post-Enlightenment, scientific and evidence-based age, appealing only to the almighty power of God in the face of serious illness would be regarded as naïve at best, and absolute stupidity at worst. Because in our experience, miraculous healings are few and far between, no matter how fervent and unending our prayers might be for ourselves or those we love.

So these miraculous healings by Jesus can make some of us pretty uncomfortable, as we don’t want to associate ourselves with such naiveté or even ignorance. We also might object to the portrayal of God as somewhat whimsical and capricious, choosing to instantaneously heal person A, and person C, but not person B, for no good reasons that we can see.

And, healing stories make us uncomfortable because of the abuses we have witnessed by those who prey upon the weak, the sick, the needy, to line their own pockets. We’ve all seen and heard of the con artists, from the television evangelist whacking some hapless person on the head and yelling, “Be healed, in the name of *Jesus*, I command you, devil, to come out!”; to the magical prayer cloth guaranteed to bring you healing for any affliction you might have: “Just send along \$49.95, and receive this wondrous holy cure!”

So when you add in the supernatural element of an exorcism, a casting out of demons, it’s even more problematic. Miracle stories are hard enough to believe, with our scientific 21st century worldview, but at least we know what it is like to long for healing, or to want to feed those who are hungry. But demon-possession is way beyond the experience and imagination of most of us. I know I am more likely to account for the man’s condition in the story with some kind of mental illness, or maybe some kind of seizure disorder, than I am to diagnose him as being possessed by an “unclean spirit.” And I’d guess that’s true for most of us here.

Which presents something of a dilemma for us this week, as Mark tells the story of Jesus casting out an unclean spirit. And not only does Mark tell this story, but he tells it right up front. In fact, this is the first miracle story Mark reports, which should make us sit up and take notice.

After all, this miraculous healing story in Mark’s gospel comes soon after Jesus first sermon: “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.” First, and very short sermon. So short that Jesus doesn’t really explain what he means by the time being fulfilled, and the kingdom of God coming near, and what the good news might be that we’re called to trust and live by.

Perhaps it is the things that Jesus does immediately after this short sermon, that explain or unpack or even embody his sermon. Maybe the series of miracles that he performs are

meant to describe for us, in living relief, what this kingdom of God he proclaims is near, is actually like.

And the very first miracle he performs, to show us what God's kingdom is like, is an exorcism, the casting out of a spirit that is said to be "unclean". Uncleaness in biblical times didn't mean you were covered with the kind of dirt you could scrub off in the bathtub. Being unclean actually meant you had been in contact with something that separated you from God. So the opposite of "unclean" is more like, *holy*, or *sacred*, or *set apart for God's use*.

Maybe that tells us something about what an "unclean spirit" could be. You remember earlier in the story, a few weeks ago, when Jesus was baptized in the river Jordan? The heavens opened, the Holy Spirit descended on him like a dove, and he heard God's blessing and promise proclaimed to him, "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased!" Well, now we see the opposite of that experience, the blessing of the Holy Spirit. This man, the one Jesus heals, is possessed of an "unclean" spirit, a spirit that is definitely not telling him that he is beloved of God or God-pleasing in any way.

Maybe, instead of images of demons from Hollywood's horror movies, an unclean spirit is more like any force or power that is opposed to God's yearnings and desires for creation. Maybe an unclean spirit is any force that curses rather than blesses; that tears down, rather than builds up; that disparages rather than encourages; that sows hatred rather than sharing love; that seeks to split human beings apart from each other and from God, rather than drawing us all together.

In other words, maybe the first chapter of Mark's gospel can be boiled down to this: Jesus has been baptized and blessed, been tempted in the wilderness, and now comes to proclaim and embody kingdom of God on earth. And he does this by opposing the forces in this world which would rob the children of God of all that God hopes and intends for us.

If I look at this way, I have to admit that not only is possession not quite as unthinkable as I might have thought. As many of you know, I have suffered from serious clinical depression in the past. I have experienced feeling like I am not myself, like I am not "in my right mind". I have even, in the times when I was most seriously ill, heard myself saying things to myself that were harmful and abusive and most definitely, not from or of God.

But even when well, as I am now and have been for many years, there are times when I do or say things I wish I hadn't later, because I am angry, or hurt, or envious. When I am possessed by something that is clearly not the Spirit of God at work. When I look back at myself and my behaviour and say, "what was I thinking?!" Or when I vow to keep from saying or doing the hurtful thing, and then promptly do it anyway.

I am guessing that many of you also know what it is like to be possessed like this. After all, the man with the unclean spirit in today's reading is actually at community worship on the Sabbath! The unclean spirit that holds you or someone you love captive might be raging anger, or blistering resentment, or soul-destroying envy. It may be an addiction to alcohol, or drugs, or gambling. Or, it may be a more socially approved unclean spirit like workaholicism, or fear, or

greed. Maybe it is a cultural stigma or prejudice that is so pervasive it keeps you from who God created you to be, blessed to be a blessing.

Whatever it is, our scripture this morning wants us to know and trust and experience that God is, even now, at work cleansing us from such spirits. How does that happen? I don't always know. Is it as dramatic as the story we hear today? Actually, sometimes it is. Ask around, and you'll start to hear stories of people who have had dramatic and sudden encounters with God's grace and healing.

And, sometimes it's not. Sometimes the road to healing and restoration takes both time and company. Sometimes it's not about a single prayer but the steady support of a grief support network, or an AA group, or a prayer chain, or a parenting group, or therapy, or medication, or all of the above. God is at work in all these ways and so many more to free us from the unclean spirits that still possess us.

So I invite you, to take a minute after the sermon and before we sing, to contemplate and name something that possesses you, something that is holding you captive. You're invited to write it on the piece of paper in your bulletin, anonymously, and to offer it to God for healing as you come forward for communion, in the wooden baskets that will be by each communion station. Of course, you are welcome to the two healing prayer stations as well.

Because as uncomfortable as it might make us...as hard as it might be to believe...this is the gospel: that God is still in the business of freeing us from those powers which seek to rob us, and all God's children, of all God hopes and intends for us. This is good news. Thanks be to God!