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Evil Be Silent

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As I mentioned in my sermon last week, we are in the early chapters of the gospel of Mark and we are in the early stages of the ministry of Jesus

Last week, Jesus picked up his first disciples, and this week, Jesus performs his first public deed of power

Mark, as a gospel writer, is not known for his loquaciousness as are some of his counterparts – no, for Mark, the stories are a bit more to the point: “Jesus was in the temple teaching, people were amazed.”

I’m paraphrasing, but not by much!

So it’s Mark’s description of what happened next that captured my attention this week: “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!’ And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him.”

The next line is classic Mark: “they were all amazed”

I would have loved to experience Mark as the announcer at a baseball game: “the player is at the plate, he swung his bat, it was a homerun, the crowd went wild.”

Not a lot of frills, but his words certainly pack a punch

If you were wondering at all if this Jesus fellow meant business, Mark assures you he does

If you were wondering at all if Jesus was the incarnate expression of our mighty God, Mark assures you, he is

And in this exchange with the person with an unclean spirit, we glimpse Mark's assertion that in the battle of good vs. evil, clean vs. unclean, Jesus wins

If I were like Mark, I might end my sermon right there – but you know I'm much more verbose than that!

In particular, I'm stuck on this image of a person with an unclean spirit and Jesus' interaction with them

Debie Thomas reminds us in a reflection on this text that, "Some commentaries recast [the unclean spirit] as a mental illness, or as a medical condition like epilepsy. Others insist on it being an actual demon — a malevolent being that ensnares human souls. Still others argue that spirits in the New Testament are simply metaphors for anything that might 'possess' or 'control' us — anger, fear, lust, greed, hatred, envy, etc."¹

I think the former can be quite a dangerous reading of scripture – a person with mental illness or epilepsy must be cured of their "unclean-ness"

Not only is it incredibly ableist, it is also too superficial – it doesn't seem to address the dialog between the person and Jesus in any meaningful way

I think I lean towards the latter interpretation, that the "unclean spirit" is anything that might "possess" or "control" us like anger, fear, lust, greed, hatred, envy, etc.

but I also – in the spirit of storytelling and meaning-making – think it's amazingly interesting to think of these things that possess us as demons - malevolent beings that ensnare human souls

¹ <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/essays/1628-the-exorcist-in-the-synagogue>

Cynthia Briggs Kittredge, President and Professor of New Testament at the Seminary of the Southwest in Austin, Texas helps to hold these things together for me when she writes in her reflection on this text that “the possession by demons illustrates the reality of evil and gives it, even for modern hearers, a shape and a sound.”²

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This is what stories can do, this is what Mark has done: Mark has made anger, fear, lust, greed, hatred, and envy a character in this story embodied in “a man with an unclean spirit.”

Mark has given evil a shape and a sound – and I think if we’re honest with ourselves it is someone we’re all too familiar with

“all of us suffer (or have suffered) under the bondage of ‘spirits’ that diminish, distort, and wound us,” Debie Thomas writes. “All of us know (or have known) what it’s like to lose agency, mobility, and dignity to forces too powerful for us to defeat on our own. And whether we regard those forces as spiritual, psychological, biological, metaphorical, or cultural, this Gospel story tells us true things about how ‘unclean spirits’ affect and manipulate our souls.”

Evil is as much the events and things of the world we can’t bear to watch on the news as it is the parts of us that we hide from or diminish – either out of feeling ashamed or not feeling safe enough to be vulnerable

It’s the “instagram vs. reality” syndrome of our time – the images of ourselves, our families, our lives that we project to the world that don’t match our true being

² <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/fourth-sunday-after-epiphany-2/commentary-on-mark-121-28-4>

It's the truths about ourselves that we keep out of church because what have they to do with the love and grace of God in this sanctuary?

"What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us?"

"Be silent, and come out!" Jesus says

Mark gives shape and sound to the very things that make us feel most afraid, most vulnerable, most unlike ourselves – the evil of the world that tells us we're not enough – Mark gives it shape and sound so that we can finally acknowledge that it's there for all of us at some time or another

And in today's gospel text we get to hear Jesus address this evil – "Be silent, and come out!"

Jesus' first public act of power is to see and address the very things we are so good at looking away from and hiding.

Debie Thomas writes "Jesus stepped directly into the pain, rage, ugliness, and horror at the heart of this story. He wasn't squeamish. He didn't flinch. His brand of holiness didn't require him to keep his hands clean. He was in the fear, in the sickness, in the nightmare, ready to engage anything that diminished the lives of those he loved."

"Be silent, and come out!"

To the edges of your being that hold you back in fear – Jesus says, be silent and come out!

to the forces of this world that tell you you're not enough just the way you are – Jesus says, be silent and come out!

to the part of you that is saying "we're not supposed to talk about these kinds of things in church" - Jesus says, be silent and come out!

To the systems of this world that convince us that our neighbor is actually our enemy – and to the systems of this world that tell us who and how we are in this world makes us the enemy – Jesus says, be silent and come out!

Some of us might actually encounter the shape and sound of evil in the real world on a regular basis

And for some of us, evil lurks in the shadows and periphery of our consciousness

But the effects are the same: it holds us back, it diminishes our sense of self, it interferes in relationships

Exactly the opposite of everything God desires for you.

So hear Jesus this morning as he says to the evils of this world “be silent and come out!”

God seeks your wholeness.

Thanks be to God, Amen.