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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
1/29/2012, Epiphany 4B
Mark 1:21-28
Passions and Addictions

In the name of the Father and of the † Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

²³And immediately 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." (Mark 1:23-24, RSV)

If our Lord can save *this* man, then he can save you and me too, regardless the passions, addictions, bad habits, or demons that might be driving us along.

THE TROUBLED MAN IN ATLANTA

I believe I have mentioned the following story before, but if so, it was a while ago, and so will be new for some of you.

Long ago, when I was a young man preparing for seminary, our Sunday morning liturgy in our little Lutheran church back then was suddenly disrupted by an intense stranger. He strode into church in the middle of the liturgy, walked up the center aisle to the front pew, sat for a while, then stood up and asked our pastor whether he could give his testimony to the Lord. Dear old Pastor George Fischer was a kind man, and so he yielded the floor to the stranger, sat, and listened to him along with the rest of us.

All was well...for a while. The man's life had been transformed for the good by coming to faith in Jesus. We were all grateful for that and glad to hear his testimony. But the thing is, the more he talked, the more he seemed to wind himself up, like winds whipping around the fields and constituting themselves into a tornado. Soon he was shouting at us, getting rather abusive of us. I bet we probably deserved it, sinners that we are, and yet it just did not seem right to be so maligned by this stranger. Soon the ushers came forward, took him by the arms, escorted him back down the aisle, and bid him farewell.

We all sat there stunned. This commotion was quite unusual in our quiet little church. Also, I sat there befuddled by the double vision that some of you might be having if you are thinking of going to seminary. And I hope some of you are! But if you are, then you might find yourself rather split in two, part of you worshiping and listening to the pastor, while the other half sits there imagining yourself preaching and leading the liturgy. So, I was keenly interested in what Pastor Fischer was going to say about this strange event, imagining that some day I might face a similar commotion.

Pastor Fischer simply returned to the chancel and spoke to us quite gently about it. He reminded us of what the Bible says, that God is not the “author of confusion, but of peace”:

For God is not the author of confusion, but of peace, as in all churches of the saints. (1 Corinthians 14:33, KJV)

That sounded right to us, so we soon immersed ourselves back in the liturgy and regained some peace.

As it turned out, we were but one stop on this stranger’s mission. He had recently been released from some treatment center and had resolved to visit every church in town and give his testimony. It did not always go well. Rumor had it that at one church, the priest punched him in the nose, and at another he was thrown down the steps so hard he broke his arm. God pity the poor man!

A SUFFERER FAR UNDER THE POWER OF SIN

And who knows the suffering the strange man in this morning’s Bible story might have known? Our Gospel Lesson tells the story of a poor man so far under the power of an evil spirit that it is hard to catch sight of the man himself any more.¹ He speaks, for example, in the plural:

“What have you to do with *us*, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy *us*?”

What kind of talk is that? One man referring to himself as “us.”

He is part of the liturgy, but seems unaffected by it, untamed by it. Everyone else in that synagogue has been moved, even astonished by the authoritative teaching of Jesus of Nazareth, but not this man. He is not astonished by the divine preaching, but riled up by it. The poor man stands firmly against Jesus. The unclean spirit in him cannot tolerate the presence of Jesus. It is with the evil spirit as with the gunslingers of old who would glare at one another and say, “This town just ain’t big enough for both of us!” Between Jesus and this evil spirit there could be no peace. And the poor man was caught in the middle.

SOME DEVILS ARE DELICATE. NOT THIS ONE

Some devils are delicate. They are masters of charming words and clever arguments, and through these means they lead folks astray. But not this devil. He was an “unclean” spirit. Devils are never particularly clean, and so for the Bible to say that this man had an “unclean” spirit means that he was probably quite

¹ Charles Spurgeon notes this in his 1884 sermon “An Astounding Miracle.” I have borrowed some other images too from this great sermon.

disagreeable. Think of the most foul-talking, aggressive, mean-hearted guy you've ever known. That is probably what this fellow in the synagogue was like.

But I mean him no harm in describing him this way. Aye, I would describe him even worse if I could come up with the words, because there is good news for this troubled man. No matter how far he has fallen, nor how foul he has become, there is a Saviour in this world, and he is will able to say to the unclean spirit, Begone! Peace. Be still.

The more awful I describe this man to be, the more hope for any of us who somehow akin to this man.

LET US NOT PLAY WITH FIRE!

And that is the point: To some degree, each of us akin to this troubled man. Each of us is under sway of altogether too much sin.

To be a human being in this fallen world is to be the kind of creature who is vulnerable to bad habits, passions, and addictions. Before the bad habit took hold, we were more free to be virtuous, but now the path of virtue is hard. Before the addiction took hold of us, we were free to come and go as we wish, but once the addiction has laid hold we whirl around the object of our desire and are drawn into it, like a planet in its decaying orbit, moving on and on toward its destruction. And once the passion set up house in our heart, we allowed into our lives a spirit that will be very hard to oust. There is good reason indeed for the coveting commandments. Our Maker knows about us that we are prone to improper desires -- either wanting a good thing overmuch or wanting something we ought not to have, like our neighbor's spouse.

Let us beware such bad habits, addictions, and passions. To draw near to them is to draw near to fire! To entertain them is risk doing ourselves and others much harm.

But the great thing about this morning's Gospel story is that even a man so far gone as the demonic in this story is capable of being saved by Jesus. This man is not confused about Jesus. He does not doubt that Jesus is a true prophet -- indeed the very Prophet within all prophets. He does not doubt that Jesus speaks for God, indeed that he is the very Word of God. The misery of the man is not that he is confused about Jesus, but that he hates Jesus. He does not want to be in the same world as Jesus. And yet, the good news is that Jesus has the authority to heal the man. Jesus can save him, when no one else can.

The rescue is firm, complete, and quick. All it took was a word from Jesus. The one who could still a raging storm on the sea with a mere word is well able to stir the disturbed soul of this demonic.

²⁵But Jesus rebuked him, saying, "Be silent, and come out of him!"

And it was so. The poor man was set free from his demon, and that was a good day for that man.

I DO NOT SAY IT IS EASY, ONLY POSSIBLE

I do not say it is easy to overcome bad habits, addictions, passions, and demons. I have known people dear to me who have failed. But my point is this: You -- let your heart speak your own name here -- *you* should ever feel that you are beyond saving. Neither you nor I should fear that we are bad, bad to the bone, and that we cannot turn things around. Let no one say:

I am lost! For me there can be no rescue. I am a sinner sinking deeply in sin and am beyond saving.

For if Jesus can save the poor demon-dominated man in today's story, he can save you and me and put us back in our right mind and right spirit.

The presence of Jesus in that synagogue long ago certainly made a difference. It made a night-and-day difference. It made the difference between suffering and health, madness and clarity. Should we imagine that the presence of this *same* Jesus makes no difference now?

You might say, "But, Pastor, the days of miracles are done. The Lord seems not to rule his church by way of miracles as he did in the early days."

But I answer in return, Oh, the days of miracles are not done! There are multitudes of wonders in this world, for Jesus still saves sinners, the Holy Spirit still stands ready to sanctify us, and St. Paul's saying is still true:

¹⁵This is a faithful saying, and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners; of whom I am chief. (1 Timothy 1:15, KJV)

The heart of many a sinner could give a good testimony. There are alcoholics who know that they live day by day, and nothing can be taken for granted, and yet they are also able to give the good testimony: I *do* live! I have changed! I am on the comeback trail.

There are people driven by various passions who have bit by bit calmed down those passions. They might have had setbacks, but they tried again. They prayed, they kept their eye on Jesus and his manner of life, they tried to be mindful of the good they could do in this world if only they would get their passions under control, and one day, they look up and find that they are back in control of their lives. That is a good day -- a day akin to the day Jesus set the demoniac free in Capernaum's synagogue.

Jesus did it then. He lives to do it now! Oh, "the glorious liberty of the children of God!" exclaims St. Paul. (Romans 8:21, KJV) Anyone who has felt himself bound as if with chains, but has walked with Jesus a step at a time until those chains have relaxed their hold and at last fallen off, can join St. Paul in praising the freedom available for us through our Savior Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.