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Mark 1:21-28
The Demoniac and the Savior

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

²³ ... 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 1:21-28, RSV)

Two things are worthy of remark in this passage: First, that this poor man was in the synagogue, and, second, in that synagogue on that particular day, he meets one who is stronger than the demon in him, to his salvation. So, this gives me the structure of my sermon: Let's consider the demoniac and the Savior. First the demoniac.

THIS POOR MAN IN THE SYNAGOGUE

This poor man is just about all gone. I mean, his humanity: it is just about lost, erased, overwhelmed by the bad spirit within him. Who knows how he got in such a condition? I imagine that he started down some fairly innocent path, but he followed that path too far, to abuse, so that bit by bit, what had been at one time a comforting drink had become demon drink. Or what had been an occasional outburst of temper had become demon rage. Or what had been sexual attraction had turned into demon lust, so that now the poor man is out of control. In fact, the man is so far out of control that he himself hardly makes an appearance in our story. Note, for example, that Jesus makes no appeal to his faith, for I fear the poor man has no faith. Jesus does not say to him what he said to the father of the lunatic child at the foot of the Mount of Transfiguration:

...all things are possible to him that believeth. (Mark 9:23, KJV)

Nor is the demoniac able to answer back with the desperate and profound words of the father:

And straightway the father of the child cried out, and said with tears, Lord, I believe; help thou mine unbelief. (Mark 9:24, KJV)

Jesus does not ask him, “Would you be well?” for I fear the honest answer would be, “No, I would not be well. Leave me in peace. Leave me to my bottle, leaven me to my demon.” This poor man was falling headlong into destruction, but the demon in him was so strong that he tried to cast aside the one Rope that could save him.

What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? (Mark 1:24, RSV)

He tries to dismiss Jesus, as if the Savior could have nothing to do with him.

And in his next exclamation, he explains why is trying to push Jesus away: He *fears* Jesus. He fears his Savior:

Have you come to *destroy* us? (Mark 24, RSV)

What a world of misery is contained in that question, “Have you come to destroy us?” How much suffering goes on in this old world because of *fear* — fear to do the good, fear to get up and do what needs to be done? How much good do we forfeit from fear? How much good have we lost because parents were too afraid to speak the truth to their children or the children to speak the truth to their parents. Or neighbors or colleagues at work missed out on the good they could have advanced because they were too afraid to speak it. At this past Friday’s evening’s Vision Retreat at the parsonage, Seminarian James Miller lifted up his wonderful vision of a whole congregation of *evangelists* — people like you folks before me — people who are trained and eager to work alongside Jesus in his ongoing ministry to save souls. And much good could come from that, *but* it is going to take some courage in us.

Well, tremendous good is available to the demoniac if only he would not yield to fear.

Have you come to *destroy* us? (Mark 24, RSV)

Onlookers could say that it is madness to keep repeating something that brings you misery, and yet it is not entirely madness. It is not entirely insane to be afraid of a new way of life. It is not mere madness to fear leaving behind that which is familiar even if it is hurting you. We all fear to leave behind settled ways.

No! Jesus has not come to destroy the man. But he *has* come to destroy the demon, and the poor man will be much better off if he lets Jesus do his saving work. It is scary, but it is good to let Jesus take the mastery of our lives.

HE DOES ONE THING RIGHT

I have been developing the theme that the demoniac in this story is in deep trouble. If ever there are lost souls, he seems to be among them. And I find it a

troubling thing to think about a human being so under the control of a demon that the man himself hardly does anything in this story.

And yet, he does *one* thing: He comes to church. He comes to the synagogue. He puts me in mind of a wounded animal, who knows that his wound is fatal and whose instinct is to try to make it back home, maybe to the meadow where he was born or the mountains where he grew up. So it is with this demoniac. He has lost his battle with the demon, but he limps into the synagogue anyway, following, as it were, a godly instinct. And on this particular day, he finds his Savior.

May it be so with any of us within the sound of my voice. You might view yourself defeated, conquered, overcome by some particular vice, some old demon. And yet, here you are, and God bless you for it! May you pry open some remaining window within your fortress by means of which Jesus may enter in. For there is always some such window remaining for you, as long as you live.

TERRIBLE COMMOTION

Next, I note that our Lord's exorcism of the poor man created terrible commotion:

And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him. (Mark 1:26, RSV)

A battle for the soul is being fought by the demon, and he is losing this battle. The unclean spirit *must* lose this battle, for he can never defeat Jesus. So he loses the battle, but makes a big din and chaos about it. He causes the man to cry out with a loud voice and he convulses the man, before finally the man is left in peace, whole again and in his right mind.

Oh, you dear loved ones of the demoniac: this commotion is something that you might recognize, to your sorrow. Indeed, this commotion is something that might have intimidated you and been too hard for you to take so that you gave in and consented to the demon remaining in your loved one. Or maybe you stood firm and withstood the convulsing and the crying with a loud voice. And you are glad you did, yet you remain somehow traumatized by what you went through back then. The demons do not easily give up, but take comfort from today's story that the demons must yield to Jesus. No case is hopeless. If any of should fear that we ourselves are the demoniac, let us never despair, for our case is not hopeless. We can get better. It might take some chaos and suffering and convulsing and loud shouting, yet we can get better. Press on in the name of Jesus toward health.

WE MIGHT BE THE DEMONIAIC

I have praised the demoniac for being in the synagogue, for in being there, he gave himself a chance for salvation, and he was indeed saved. But now I want to note that just as the demoniac was in the church in the Bible story, so the

demoniac might be in the church this very day. Indeed, we might be the one! We might be the demoniac, only we have not been found out yet.

What I am doing now is drawing attention to the picture we get of the demoniac *before* Jesus casts out that unclean spirit. As far as we can tell, the poor man sat there quietly in the pew for a while. He sat so quietly that Jesus was able to preach enough that the people were astonished by his teaching. It was only then, when people realized that something very serious was afoot — perhaps even divine — it was only then that we hear of the demoniac and his groan and his protest. Prior to that, the demoniac might have been there as a quiet member of the community.

This is a possibility for you and me too. Even though we sit here quietly in church, we might be sitting here as lost as the demoniac in our story. No one drives that man out of the synagogue. He is not so far out of control that he is somehow intolerable in the house of prayer. For all we know, he might be a calm and respected gentleman within the community of faith, judging by his external conduct. But pity the man nonetheless, because he has a demon in him. There is some part of his heart that is guarded — indeed is an unassailable, impregnable fortress of resistance to God. There is something in him that he simply will not give up. *He* means to be the pilot of his life in this matter, not God. Onlookers may never suspect him about this. He may simply seem like a prosperous man who comes to synagogue as a good man should do, and yet in his heart of hearts, he is not simply a prosperous man, but a covetous one. He almost trembles with excitement at the prospect of more gain. He grieves and is angry over every penny he lost. He skirts the boundaries of the law, exploits the grey areas of business, thinks nothing at all about the misery he imposes on others through his greed. He hears the blessed words of Jesus:

For what is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world,
and lose his own soul? (Matthew 16:26, KJV)

But these words mean little to him. Indeed, he has heard these words since he was a boy coming to church and sitting on his mother's lap, yet the words have always simply sailed over his head. They found no place in his heart, and they led him to no searching of soul. He maintains a strong defense against God in this one thing, his love of money, but in this strong defense, he is controlled by a demon, and it is going to be hard to get it out of him.

No consent!

Let the church give no consent to the demon. Let the church not aid and abet the demon! Let the church be the one place on earth where the demoniac will hear the words, "No, do not yield to your demon. There is a better way. Even half-steps toward that better way are good and precious. Do not give up. You have a Saviour who can help you, if only you will let him. Let Christ be the pilot of your ship. Let

him be the master of your life even in this one place where the demon has you — *especially* in this one place where the demon has you.” For if the church gives up the battle against the demon, will the world come to the rescue? What hope is left for health and faith and peace if the church consents to the demon? Let the church ever proclaim the Word and will of God, though it should annoy the demons in us no end.

THE SAVIOR

Let me end by speaking of the Savior. I mean Jesus, who healed this poor man. Jesus is the fulfillment of the promise of Moses recorded in our First Lesson. Jesus is in fact “another prophet like unto Moses.” Indeed, he is far superior to Moses as a prophet. Indeed, if Moses spoke any truth to the people of Israel, it was because Jesus was whispering the word into his soul. We learn this from St. John. Jesus is the very Word of God. He is the Word by which true prophets speak at all.

Imagine Jesus in today’s Gospel story. Clearly there is something striking about his teaching. Our text says that the people are amazed by it:

²²And they were astonished at his teaching, for he taught them as one who had authority, and not as the scribes. (Mark 1:22, RSV)

Jesus had no credentials as the world measures things. He did not graduate from Seminary. He did not graduate from some school of rhetoric. He was not ordained to the Holy Ministry. He simply stood there and spoke with such authority that he shook the congregation. Most of us preachers hold back some when we speak. We do not want to phrase things wrongly and we certainly do not want to misrepresent the truth of the Gospel and thereby lead souls astray. But Jesus had no such hesitations. He seems to have stood there and spoken the truth, because he *knew* the truth, indeed he *is* the truth.

And it was with such authority that Jesus commanded the demon to come out of the man. What choice did the demon have? None. Truth will always triumph over evil in the end.

That is why you and I should have hope as we wrestle with any demons in our lives. One thing is for sure: Those demons are doing down! There is no point in letting them ruin our lives because when all is said and done and the dust settles, the demons will be gone. And we ourselves will be left pretty sad and regretful that we spent so much of our time and so many of our opportunities serving that miserable demon.

Christ is alive now! Therefore it is possible to forsake the demon now! We can start living for Christ now, even when it does not yet feel natural and at least part of us would rather be running with the devils. We should never believe that the door to a holy life is slammed shut on us. That cannot be when Christ lives and is knocking at our door, appealing to us that we should let him in. Let us *let him in*,

to the benefit of ourselves and our neighbors and to his glory, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.