

Come To Bless (Mark 1:21-28)

Today's gospel story occurred very early in the ministry of Jesus. Jesus had been baptized by John and then spent time in the wilderness. He'd just come into Galilee, announcing that he had good news to share. Peter, Andrew, James, and John had heard Jesus' message and left their fishing nets to follow him, to become his disciples.

Peter probably suggested that the little group come back to Capernaum, for that's where Peter and his family lived. And so on the Sabbath, Jesus and his new disciples went to synagogue at Capernaum.

Now the synagogue was different from our church. In the synagogue, there was no music or singing. The synagogue was also different from the Jewish temple. Sacrifices were made at the temple, but not at the synagogue. Also, there was one temple--in Jerusalem--but there were lots of synagogues. According to Jewish law, wherever there were 10 Jewish families, a synagogue had to be formed. So, the purpose of the synagogue was not to handle sacrifices or to sing or to listen to music. The purpose of the synagogue was to teach—to teach local Jews about God—his laws and his ways.

And there were no professional teachers. On any given day, anyone could be called upon by the leader or ruler of the synagogue to teach. When I was dating Paul, he and his family attended a rural church with no professional minister. And so on any given Sunday, the person leading the service might look around and say, "Let's see...Sister Abbey, would you come up and read our scripture for today?" "And now, Brother Mike, would you come up and give us a message today?" That's the way it was in the synagogue.

But on this particular day, the rabbi or teacher Simon Peter and his brother Andrew had brought back home with them was called upon to come forward and teach. We don't know what Jesus taught about that day, but the Jews of Capernaum were astonished at the way Jesus taught, for he taught them like one who had personal authority. His teaching wasn't at all like the teaching of the scribes—and the scribes were considered the experts in the law of God.

The scribes had three jobs: to pull out from the Older Testament everything that would apply to everyday living; to teach the laws they had extracted; and to make judgments about when people broke the law. The scribes would say, "There is a teaching that says....." or "Moses said...." But apparently when Jesus taught in the synagogue at Capernaum, he spoke things like, "If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea" (Mark 9:42). Jesus spoke with first-hand or personal authority.

Suddenly, while Jesus was teaching in the synagogue, an unclean spirit made itself known! Now, at this time and place, everyone believed in unclean spirits, or demons. In ancient cemeteries skulls with holes bored in them have been found. In one cemetery, six of the 120 skulls uncovered had such holes. The holes were too small to have been for any surgery. Thus, it's thought that the holes were drilled in the skulls to let out demons who seemingly had taken possession of those individuals.

Now, as William Barclay pointed out, "It does not matter whether or not we believe in all this....The point is that the people in New Testament times did." Thus, in Jesus' day, there were lots of exorcists who claimed to cast our demons. In fact, as late as AD 340, the Christian Church actually had an Order of Exorcists.

What's significant about the unclean spirit in today's story, though, is that it was in the synagogue. The synagogue was suppose to be the area's most holy place. After all, it was where the people came to hear the holy God speak from the scrolls of the Torah. It was where the people came to hear the scribes tell them how they could live holy lives.

But there was an unclean or unholy spirit in the synagogue! And apparently the unclean spirit had been in the synagogue for some time. It must have felt safe and comfortable in the synagogue—until Jesus arrived. And then, the presence of Jesus made the unclean spirit so agitated that it revealed itself. The unclean spirit shouted, "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!"

I get a visual image of the bedroom scene in that movie called *The Exorcist*. There are actually several similarities between the gospel story and the movie. But there's one very important difference: this demon doesn't throw Jesus around--the way the one in the movie threw the priest around. In fact, all Jesus had to do was say, "Be silent, and come out of him!" And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him" (Mark 1:25-26). The word Jesus used for "be silent" was the same he would later use to calm the wind and the sea. With Jesus, it didn't matter if it was the wind, the sea, or a demon—they all recognized his authority and his power over them and thus obeyed him.

And so this is the first thing that this epiphany story reveals about Jesus. He has authority that is backed up by power.

But the story reveals something else about Jesus. The story reveals that Jesus is a liberator. Jesus doesn't stand idly by while one of God's children is abused and used. Jesus charges in—no matter the danger or cost to himself. He's God-With Us, challenging our unclean spirits where we live, work, and play. He's always tirelessly working to free us from any demonic forces that have us in chains.

And the story hints at the fact that Jesus has also come to set us free from any demonic system that seeks to keep us from the abundant life God wants for us—a system such as that of the scribes and Pharisees and their kind of religion, religion based on quoting the scriptures and enslaving humankind in all sorts of rules.

According to Todd Weir, "Mark is making this point: that the will and purpose of God present in Jesus is engaging and fighting against the purposes of evil that exist among humanity....Christ has come to shatter the domineering designs that shackle people to lower standards for life than God intends. Christ has come to free us from the demons like prejudice and pride, greed and guile. Christ is among us..."¹

And the Lord doesn't want to get us out of one system so that he can enslave us in another. For he never dictates to us or forces himself on us. He

¹ Weir, Todd, [What Will You Do With Us, Jesus?](#)

wants to set us free to know him in spirit and in truth. And, of course, on this side of the crucifixion and resurrection, we know that he also comes to set us free from sin and the death that sin brings.

Thus, today's gospel story reveals that Jesus has come to give us peace—peace within ourselves; peace amongst ourselves; and peace between ourselves and God. Thanks to today's story we know that Jesus is come to bless us—with his power to defeat the forces that try to take control of our lives--to liberate us and to give us peace.

But in studying today's story we need to also remember that after his resurrection, right before he ascended into heaven, Jesus passed the authority he demonstrated in today's gospel story on to his followers. And so, in the past some of the Lord's followers have probably used the Lord's authority to perform exorcisms and liberate us. Can you think of someone the Lord has used to be an exorcist in your life? I can think of someone who, with the Lord's help, exorcised the demons of self-centeredness and selfishness in me. And I can think of someone else who the Lord used to break some of my chains of fear. And then someone else who broke chains that in my mind limited all that God could be to me.

Yes, through his followers, the Lord continues to exorcise the demonic forces and systems that enslave us and those around us. We all know that there are a lot of troubled persons all around us—persons who are powerless to help themselves. As Jesus' followers, we are called to be co-workers with the Lord in bringing liberation to many of them.

A pastor named Mark Belletini, told of a man in a church he once served who was deeply troubled. The man was a pillar of the church. Sat on committees. Sat on the board. Taught classes. A very talented man. And this brilliant man used to put away five huge glasses of gin on ice every night, but especially before coming to a church meeting. Now, when he drank, like many alcoholics...he changed from the good Dr. Jekyll to the awful Mr. Hyde. For example, at evening church meetings, he would offer cruel commentaries or insult other people with sarcasm, innuendo and his superior mind... And then the next day, without fail, this man would walk up the driveway to his pastor's office, at exactly 3 P.M., like clockwork, and apologize for his

behavior. "I'm sorry," he would say, "I really shouldn't have said those things. I really think the world of you, and I just don't know why I said those things." Oh, he was charming and undoubtedly sincerely sorry. He never mentioned his drinking. The pastor would say something like, "Don't worry about it. No problem. Everything's forgiven."

But finally, one day, his pastor realized that he was...moving to the strings the man was pulling. The pastor realized he had been foolish. And so, the next time this man ambled up his driveway to apologize, his pastor met him at the door, welcomed him into his office, and then, when he "apologized," his pastor said to him, "Apology not accepted. And your drinking is not going to be accepted at this church anytime I am in it. For years I have watched you terrorize people, including me, with your cruel, controlling and demeaning comments. People in this congregation have come into my office in tears after one of your sarcastic tirades. I am telling you, here and now, that it will go on no more. I promise you now, if you ever come to the church drunk again, I will get all the others in the church you have hurt. Then we will pick you up bodily, put you in my car, and we'll drive you home, and dump you on your steps till you sober up. You leave these people alone." ("Be silent, and come out of him!") The man went red and silent, got up and left without a word. The pastor keep his promise. And once, yes, he and a bunch of church members did pick the man up and take him home. But no one would accept his apologies any more. They demanded he...work on his drinking problem. And eventually he did . . .² And all because the pastor and the church members finally allowed themselves to become the Lord's instruments of exorcism, liberation, and peace for the troubled man.

Similarly, may we have the wisdom, the love, and the courage to allow our exorcising, liberating Lord to work through us. What a blessing to have others look upon us, knowing that we, like our Lord, have come to liberate and give them peace—have come to bless them. Amen.

-- Terry Chamberlain Diehl; Hickman Mills Community Christian Church; February 1, 2009

² <http://firstuucolumbus.org/sermons/ser20040919.PDF>.