

Sunday, January 28, 2024
Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany (Year B)

Mark 1.21-28

The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

Service Live Streamed at:

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregoryslongbeach/videos/924163042546092>

(Sermon begins at about 22:45)

“Casting Out Demons”

As we’ve journeyed thus far through Epiphanytide, we have witnessed—and will continue to witness—the progression of and the variety of ways in which, Jesus has been revealed to us as the Son of God. That is what the feast of the Epiphany and the season that follows is about. Witnessing the ways in which Jesus is revealed to be the Son of God and, in turn, exploring what that means for us in our lives of faith. Exploring how God and Christ are manifest, are shown forth, in our lives as those who are the Body of Christ in the world.

Thus far, we have witnessed Jesus’ baptism, where God explicitly states and confirms who Jesus is: “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased” (Mk 1.11). Opening the way for exploration of how we, through our own baptisms, are similarly brought into the family of God as his beloved children. We have then seen over the last two weeks how Jesus called his disciples to follow him in preparation for his public ministry. In so doing, exploring how we, too, are called by Jesus to follow him in our own unique ministries. Today we witness the very beginning of Jesus’ public ministry—his first public act of ministry. Setting the tone for the shape and trajectory of Jesus’ life and ministry over the next three years. In the process, beginning to get an idea of the shape of our own ministries, as the Church and as individuals. And it all begins with demons.

Yes, today we are going to take on demons. Just as Jesus did in that synagogue in Capernaum. But before we get there, we do need to set the stage. As we heard in our Gospel reading, Jesus’ first act in his public ministry is to go to a synagogue on the sabbath and teach. Nothing out of the ordinary about that. Jesus is, after all, recognized as a teacher. To teach in the synagogue, he probably was actually invited to do so. One just doesn’t walk into a synagogue and start teaching without permission from the local rabbi. But then things quickly go from ordinary to the extraordinary. The first thing is in the teaching itself. We don’t know what Jesus was specifically teaching—although one could guess. Whatever his words, they must have been extraordinary, capturing the attention of those present. “They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes.” Nothing against the scribes. Scribes had an important function, serving as teachers of the Torah and interpreters of God’s laws. Not unlike what I do in sermons. Scribes would have essentially cited passages from the Torah and other authoritative material. Their teachings relied on the received authority of others. Jesus’ style was obviously different. As we are told, his teachings were not a mere regurgitation of what other authorities said. His teachings were in his own voice, carrying an authority all its own. Claiming and exercising his own authority as no other had before. While not immediately recognized by his audience, we know that this is rooted in Divine authority by virtue of being the Son of God.

While his audience recognized this was a new authority, they did not seem to recognize the source. But an unclean spirit, a demon, who had possessed a man in the congregation did. “What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? . . . I know who you are, the Holy One of God.” This demon knows exactly who Jesus is. It recognizes his power and authority. Which is juxtaposed to the human world in which Jesus’ identity, his power and authority, are not often known. Or at the very least, if known, is continually challenged. Then and now.

Jesus then proceeds to shut the demon up: “Be silent, and come out of him!” The demon did leave the man, with great drama. Further reinforcing the earlier amazement on the part of those present: “What is this? A new teaching—with authority!” Again, not like the scribes, who relied on the accepted and received knowledge of their forefathers for their authority. Rather, Jesus’ authority is conveyed not so much in his words, but in his actions. Demonstrating that his words result in action. Which is a common and central theme in Mark’s Gospel. That Jesus’ chooses to primarily teach through his actions. Many of which entail exorcisms and healings as a means of demonstrating in a tangible way how Jesus, through his teachings and his actions, provides a means by which people are changed and brought to new life. The new life that God calls his people into. A life of health and wholeness—in all its forms—made possible through Jesus and his unique authority as the Son of God.

What we see in this first encounter with a demon in the synagogue in Capernaum is that when operating out of this his new authority, Jesus is going to shake things up. If Jesus is doing his job, he is bound to bump up against demons who operate counter to his Divine authority. Similarly, when we, as members of the Body of Christ do our job, when we truly live into what it means to be followers of Christ and seek to live under the authority of his teachings, we too are bound to bump up against demons.

What? Where are we going to bump up against demons? Today, we don’t typically view the world as being overrun with demons in need of exorcism. If anything, when we hear passages like today’s Gospel reading, it’s easy to think that God has already vanquished the demons from our midst. Or that if they do exist, they are very rare, being few and far between. But rather than seek to apologize for passages such as this as being obsolete, the product of a bygone era, we need to recognize there are indeed demons in our midst. Not necessarily like in “The Exorcist,” but we are surrounded by demons nonetheless. And just as in Jesus’ time, these demons do possess individuals, they do take control of their lives, making their lives miserable, and through their actions, having the potential to make the lives of others miserable, as well. It’s just that today, demons have a different face, manifesting themselves in different ways. Yet seeking to wreak the same destruction on the lives of humanity as they did in Jesus’ time.

Don’t believe me? Just look around and you will see them. Addictions in a variety of forms. Alcohol, drugs, sex, even food. All things that, when used or engaged in in appropriate ways and with due restraint, are perfectly normal and acceptable. Interestingly enough, things that, when they become an unhealthy obsession or compulsion, are sometimes even referred to as one’s personal demon. Other forms of personal demons include a variety of emotional or psychological pathologies. Mental health issues which can, if untreated, debilitate those so afflicted. Creating a potential living hell for those who suffer with a particular ailment and for those close to them. Again, issues which are often likened to personal demons, in need of modern-day exorcism through appropriate psychiatric treatment.

These personal demons, while present throughout society and even in our churches, are in many ways outside the purview of the church to treat. Don't get me wrong, we as the church can certainly do our part to support those afflicted with addiction or with mental health issues. We do provide a space for recovery communities to meet and engage in the work of healing. And we can support these individuals by being a welcoming and hospitable place that seeks to demonstrate God's love for all. That seeks to support individuals in their journeys to health and wholeness. That is most certainly part of what we can and are called to do in confronting these particular varieties of demons.

But I'm particularly thinking of other demons. Other forms of demons that the church, faithfully living the new teaching with authority Jesus demonstrates in the Gospels, is particularly called to seek to cast out. These are the ones that are often the real demons in our midst that go unnoticed. Well, maybe not unnoticed, but which are not always viewed or named as demons. Demons that, while possessing individuals, do not necessarily wreak havoc on or seek to destroy the lives of the ones possessed. And yet, result in ideas which, when acted upon, do indeed cause harm and damage to others.

Racism and white supremacy. Misogyny. Heterosexism. Sexual objectification, particularly of women or children. Ageism. Antisemitism. Islamophobia. Extreme political ideologies. Extreme religious ideologies. Or the confluence of a number of these, such as in Christian Nationalism. All being perspectives or ideologies which pervert and deviate from the commandments foundational to our faith: to love God and to love others. All of which make a mockery of the authority and teachings of Christ. And these are just the major ones that find their way onto the nightly news, into our political and religious discourse. We could probably come up with many more personal and societal demons.

These and other similar isms, perspectives, and ideologies are the demons of our own day. Demons which possess and harm individuals and communities. That weaken and damage society as a whole. Demons that need to be exorcised from our midst so as to begin to create a space for individual and collective healing. As presented in the Gospel according to Mark, and as demonstrated by Jesus in the first action of his public ministry, this ministry of healing is what the church is all about. Not about providing us with a ticket to the afterlife, but rather to work to bring about health and wholeness for individuals and communities here and now. This means that those forces around us and in us that detract from and pervert God's vision for humanity—for the just and equitable treatment of all people as beloved children—must be confronted and overcome. Just as Jesus did with the demon in Capernaum.

To follow Jesus, to be the Body of Christ in the world today, means joining him in the sacred work of identifying and casting out the demons which are counter to and work against God's commandments to love him and one another. To be willing to confront those demons that we encounter in our day-to-day lives. And more important, and more difficult, to be willing to examine our own lives and to confront the demons we find within ourselves. Work we thankfully do not have to do alone. For we have a new teaching, a new authority, whose primary purpose is to lead us into the health and wholeness God desires for all his beloved children.