

The Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany  
January 28, 2018  
The Rev. Jedediah D. Holdorph  
Trinity Episcopal Church, Bend

Deuteronomy 18:15-20  
Psalm 111  
1 Corinthians 8:1-13  
Mark 1:21-28

A couple of weeks ago, I offered an introduction to the Gospel according to Mark at our weekly forum. One of the things I said then was simply an observation that each of the four evangelists – Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John – tells the story of Jesus a bit differently.

I hope that's not too surprising or unsettling. I understand that it might be, but it seems almost as if it should go without saying that everyone sees the world a little differently ... and we each see Jesus a little differently still. And I rather delight in noticing the differences.

One of the differences between the four gospels is what they each describe the opening act in Jesus' public ministry. For each of them, that first public act (i.e., after Jesus' baptism and the calling of his first disciples) is telling. And it tells us quite a lot about who Jesus is for them. Matthew, for example, opens with the "sermon on the mount," because for Matthew, Jesus is THE rabbi, the teacher extraordinaire. Luke tells us that the first thing Jesus was to go to his hometown and read from Isaiah about the one anointed to bring good news to the poor, release for the captives, sight to the blind, and freedom for the oppressed, because for Luke, Jesus is the one who comes to fulfill all those hopes. And John begins with a wedding feast where Jesus changes water into wine, because for John, Jesus enters into our world to offer us abundant life.

That's all well and good, but, as Mark tells it, Jesus' opening act is an exorcism. Does that mean that, for Mark, Jesus is the exorcist?

This is not, by the way, how I would have told the story. It's been described as a "no-win" situation for any preacher. No matter what's said, some in the congregation will leave, shaking their heads, saying, "I can't believe that preacher believes in demons!" Or some will leave, shaking their heads, saying, "I can't believe that preacher *doesn't* believe in demons!" Be that as it may, this is how Mark sets the stage. So we're stuck with it.

At the heart of the story, I think, there is simply this: Jesus comes to set a person free from an unclean spirit. That's the good news, even if it's a bit vexing.

The vexation for most of us is that all we know of unclean spirits and exorcisms comes from the horror films. But we would do well, at least in my estimation, to set aside Hollywood images about girls with heads that spin and all the rest. Such scenes are certainly well outside my experience ... and I suspect not likely to be relevant for most of us.

But there is a scene we would do well, I think, to keep clearly in mind. Not a scene from any movie, but a scene from Mark's gospel that comes even before this morning's opening act.

Before the “unclean spirit” challenges Jesus, as we heard here this morning, recall that there was another Spirit first. When Jesus was baptized, Mark says that the Holy Spirit descended on him and a voice announced to him, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

That’s the striking contrast that underscores the striking conflict. Two men, one afflicted and the other a healer, are possessed by two spirits: one we call the Holy Spirit and the other an unclean spirit ... and the unclean spirit decidedly is NOT announcing that the one possessed is a beloved child of God or that God is pleased in any way. Quite the opposite.

Lutheran preacher and commentator David Lose says that the unclean spirit stands in for ...

... those forces that are diametrically opposed to God’s will. Rather than bless, they curse; rather than build up, they tear down; rather than encourage, they disparage; rather than promote love, they sow hate; rather than draw us together, they seek to split us apart.

So maybe we could boil down the first chapter of Mark leading up to this story this way: Jesus has been baptized, tempted in the wilderness, and now comes to proclaim and demonstrate the kingdom of God on earth, and he does this *by opposing the forces of evil which would rob the children of God of all that God hopes and intends for them.*<sup>i</sup>

I may not have ever encountered a malevolent supernatural being – that is, if I’m expecting to see something like shown in a horror film – but I can see evidence of forces that rob God’s children “of all that God hopes and intended for them,” that robs them of their dignity and worth, of their hope and even of life itself. The way I’ve just described it, possession by an unclean spirit is not so bizarre or foreign.

If an unclean spirit is an ungodly, not easily understood or easily countered, I think we all have some awareness of unclean spirits at work in us ... and in the world around us: gun violence that kills; prejudice or institutional racism that deprive some among us of their full stature as children of God; poverty that destroys hope; addictions or depression that diminish life and vitality; sexual abuse and exploitation that degrades others and devastates lives; all manner of disease that corrode.

Seen this way, any power that has a grip over us and every power that damages a child of God, threatening her or his place in the world, is an unclean spirit. Any force that diminishes a person – as seen by others or by themselves – is an unclean spirit. Unclean spirits abound.

But if any of that is true, there is good news for us in this morning’s gospel. For as Mark tells it, Jesus will not ignore what ails us. Instead, Jesus names it and confronts it. He never condemns the one afflicted, even as he condemns the affliction that imperils us.

It’s quite an opening act: Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, sets a person free from an unclean spirit.

We've had our own opening act. In baptism, those being baptized – or their parents and sponsors speaking on their behalf – make three renunciations of evil. Three questions are asked:

Do you renounce Satan and all the spiritual forces of wickedness that rebel against God?

Do you renounce the evil powers of this world which corrupt and destroy the creatures of God?

Do you renounce all sinful desires that draw you from the love of God?

*Book of Common Prayer, p. 302*

The questions compel us to see the ungodly forces at work in us and in the world around us: “sinful desires that draw [us] from the love of God”; and “evil powers ... which corrupt and destroy the creatures of God”; and, yes, “spiritual forces of wickedness” (which is to say, the ungodly forces, so hard to understand or address, that are not of God). Three times those who are baptized will say, “I renounce them.”

And then there are three other questions that follow: three affirmations on the heels of the three renunciations. They invite us to affirm our trust in Jesus and to lay claim to the hope that there is help for us as we follow Jesus' example of living under the influence of the Holy Spirit, the clean spirit that blesses rather than curses, the clean spirit that builds up rather than tear down, the clean spirit that encourages rather than disparages, the clean spirit that promotes love rather than gives in to fear, the clean spirit that draws us together rather than split us apart.

May Almighty God, who has given us a new birth by water and the Holy Spirit, keep us firm in the hope of that new life given us.

---

<sup>1</sup> David Lose @ [http://www.workingpreacher.org/dear\\_wp.aspx?article\\_id=550](http://www.workingpreacher.org/dear_wp.aspx?article_id=550).