

Mark 1:21-28

²¹They (Jesus and His disciples) went to Capernaum; and when the sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught. ²²They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes. ²³Just then 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." ²⁵But Jesus rebuked him, saying, "Be silent, and come out of him!" ²⁶And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him. ²⁷They were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, "What is this? A new teaching — with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him." ²⁸At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.

MARK 1:21-28, 2015

Mark's gospel is really quite brief in a number of ways. He leaves out the story of Jesus' birth all together and opens with the story of John the Baptist and Jesus' baptism.

There is then a two verse description of the temptation of Jesus followed by the calling of the first four disciples we heard last week.

Now, with this passage today we are still in chapter one and Jesus is already beginning his ministry among the people in Capernaum where he now lives.

This story is the first account of Jesus teaching in the synagogue which was a privilege reserved for the scribes who would teach and interpret the scriptures for the people.

This is the event in which Jesus makes his first impression, and what an impression He makes.

In each of the gospels first events and first impressions give us insight into the larger themes and a clear understanding of Jesus' mission and character

- In Mathew, Jesus is a teacher and a new lawgiver like Moses. Love God and neighbor.
- In John he creates unexpected and unimaginable abundance.

- Recall the woman at the well, feeding the five thousand, the bread of life, the light of the world,
 - Washing he disciples feet.
- In Luke Jesus is the one who releases those held captive, heals the sick and infirm, and proclaims good news to the poor and the Lord's favor to all.
- In Mark the first thing Jesus does is pick a fight with an unclean spirit.

Mark's gospel begins with a confrontation.

This fight scene may be dramatic but it really isn't much of a fight.

This evil spirit comes protesting Jesus' very presence in the synagogue and with apparent ease and authority Jesus casts away this evil spirit;

a sign of things to come; a sign that Jesus, in the end, will win the day, every day.

If you believe that first events in the story of Jesus, or first impressions, are important,

you can understand this as a sign that Jesus comes to oppose all the forces that keep the children of God from the abundant life God desires for them.

This ancient story is important because it carries that same message to you here today.

It is a message relevant for today because it lets you know that Jesus' word still has the power and authority in this world,

and can have that power and authority in your life.

Jesus opposes anything that robs you of the joy and community and purpose He created you for.

But, I don't want you to hear this as the "Prosperity Gospel" you might hear in so many churches these days.

a belief that being faithful will make you rich.

That is not the abundant life Jesus talks about.

The abundant life is that life of joy you experience living under God's care,

the community that gathers around to lift one another up and give strength and encouragement,
and the fulfilled purpose of God for your life.

The unclean spirit in our gospel lesson represents the things in life that possess you and rob this from you.

What are they?

For different people there are different things.

For some it may be anger and resentment from hurt and betrayal experienced in relationships, broken families,

disappointments in the workplace or a school,
Or what must just seem like an unfair life.

Fear is another one.

Fear of vulnerability and openness to live in relationship with God who you may believe has left you hanging, abandoned you in desperate times,

fear of being vulnerable with others, even those judgmental Christians.

Fear of being a part of a group who don't believe exactly what you believe.

I don't mean to minimize the physiological and cultural influences in your lives,

but, some are possessed by drugs, alcoholism, the need for power and influence,
wealth or one of many other things.

It could be freedom manifest as a form of anti-dependence, and drive for individualistic, narcissistic self-determination.

“I have life under control and I don't need anyone or anything else.”

Maybe it is just the stresses and busyness of everyday life, too much to do and not enough energy left at the end of the day or week to give anything to God.

What is it that tries to separate you from God, or that is a barrier that keeps you from having a closer relationship with Jesus, from knowing the joy of that relationship, the mutuality of a community of faith, and the fulfillment of God's purpose for you?

It is a good question to ask even if you are here every week for worship, say your prayers every night before bed,
or get up in the morning and read your devotions or carry on whatever practice you have to stay connected to God.

There is always something at work to separate you from God.

And so, an important part of our calling then is to stay connected with God somehow.

When I was at the spiritual retreat for rostered leaders hosted by Bishop Schaefer a couple of weeks ago
our first exercise was to go around the circle and have everyone tell what their spiritual discipline was.

Each person telling what practice they used to stay connected to God.

This made me a little uncomfortable as I listened to each person before me talk about how they get up each morning and read and study their bible, or a devotion for one hour,

or sit outside by the pool or on the porch with their coffee where they could hear the splash of water in the fountain and bask in the presence of God.

My way does not seem like a discipline at all compared to what each of these people described.

I have tried that everyday practice thing and it just doesn't work for me. I am usually still asleep when they get up and do what they do.

You see, years ago my life became a prayer that goes on all day long.

Each day I go about what I believe God is calling me to do,
sometimes moment by moment,
and I expect God to keep His promise and stay
connected to me,
and God has always been faithful to His promise.

The admission of that in that group of colleagues became very freeing for me.

I got it out there in front of God and everybody,
and discovered that some of my colleagues viewed
what I do as a discipline every bit as much as what
was described by all the others, and themselves.

So there are many ways to stay connected to God.

FIND YOUR! Again, Find Yours

I was looking for some meditation music on Youtube the other night and found some by a woman named Julie True.

But what struck me was the message that was displayed under the video window.

She said,

“Do you want to know God? Then come to Him and soak in His presence... We are facing a time when simple positive thinking and affirmation just won't do it. They have no power in and of themselves. It is God who can supply any and all our needs. Seek him first and he will take care of the rest.” *Breathe You In* Julie True.

In our gospel lesson Jesus picks a fight with an unclean spirit and frees the man from this horrible burden.

Life was changed for that man, and the spirit also I suppose.

But, that man was then able to go on and have a normal life without the torment of this spirit.

So you also have God standing in opposition to the forces of evil in this world that separate you from God.

Don't hear this as a proclamation that with just the right prayer or healing touch from the pastor all your problems will vanish,

but that God stands between you and the evil in this world through your baptism

with the promises of forgiveness and the joy of life in His presence forever

and that includes today, tomorrow, this week and every other day.

He stands between you and that evil as you gather around this table, the table of His Son Jesus the Christ while He cleanses you from all you may bring here and leave with Him,

and saying again,

You are forgiven, come live in me.

Our God is a God of the broken, and our church is a fellowship of the needy.

You need God in all the ways He comes to you,
As Father assuring you in His words, “You are my child,
my beloved,
as the Son born to Mary and then nailed to a cross to
die for you when the only one to recognize him as the
son of God was the one who nailed him up there in the
first place,

and as Holy Spirit descending down from the
heavens torn open at Jesus’ baptism and your
own.

Amen