

January 31, 2021

The gospel of Mark is fast; the pace moves along quickly... We go from Jesus' baptism, to the temptations in the wilderness, to calling the disciples, to healing all in twenty-eight verses. That's fast!

Our reading today is an encounter between Jesus and a man with an unclean spirit... Typically, when the bible uses the language of unclean spirits or demons, it's refers to something causing human destruction.

It can be a physical ailment, but usually it is something that destroys us spiritually or emotionally. Alcoholism can be a demon... Depression can be a demon... Despair is a demon... shame, guilt, hopelessness... All these things can destroy us in one way, shape or another.

In our story today, Jesus is teaching, and the teaching itself is resonating with people. They notice it comes with authority. Jesus is connecting with the people. There is something about the teaching that is authentic, genuine and capturing their hearts.

It is the Sabbath, the people are listening closely, the man with the unclean spirit enters and he makes accusations, "What have you to do with us?" "Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are." The man with the unclean spirit is trying to discredit, and destroy Jesus. But Jesus rebukes the unclean spirit, and it comes out of him.

The unclean spirit becomes silent. And the people are amazed. They interpret the healing as a sign that the teaching itself is vindicated. Kind of like the proof is in the pudding. The casting out of the unclean spirit, substantiates the teaching.

Just seven verses prior to our story, Jesus announces “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe the good news.” This good news, this new teaching will change the world. As Jesus comes on the scene all manner of unclean spirits and demons are on the run...

Quick story... And I’ve told this story before, but it bears repeating.

When I was doing my chaplaincy training, I was asked to visit a young gal probably in her late twenties. She had asked to see a chaplain. And that’s always a “tip-off” that there’s something going on, the person has something they want to talk about.

I entered her room and introduced myself. She had long stringy hair, that hadn’t been combed in a long time. She wore glasses that were dirty and kept together by tape. She was really wary of me, watched me closely.

In ministry, relationships are everything, there has to be some trust. So, we started the conversation by making small talk, asking questions and just getting to know one another. I could tell she wanted to talk, but was hesitant. I agreed I would come back the next day...

Well, the second day was much different! She apparently determined she could trust me, so she started talking about sexual abuse by her step father, how her

mother never believed her, how her life was ruined... Believe me there were all sorts of demons flying around that day!

I was glad to hear that she had been in counseling, and was really working hard to reclaim her life. I gave her so much credit for that! She had started making plans for a better job... She was really going in the right direction.

But I could tell there was still something on her mind. She started talking about her experiences with the church. Which, believe me, were not good, of course...

She said when she was little, she prayed all the time. And when the abuse started, she prayed that it would stop. She prayed that God would give her the strength to deal with it. And the abuse just continued... She became angry with God, she admitted she had sworn at God...

At one point in the conversation, she asked me about the bible and that one unforgiveable sin-- blaspheming against the Holy Spirit. She knew that verse... I remember starting an answer, and suddenly realized what was going on...

I asked, "Are you afraid you're unforgiveable?" She hunched her shoulders and shielded her eyes, and said, "yes..." This young woman had such strength and integrity. Somewhere in her church experience, she was taught that there were some things that God would never forgive...

I told her that nothing was impossible for God, and the God I believed in can forgive anything. I said, "the unforgiveable sin, is not believing God forgives us." I told her a number of times that she was forgiven...

I said a little prayer announcing her forgiveness, and she started crying and weeping and all sorts of wailing. She experienced forgiveness like I've never seen before... In fact, a nurse came in, kind of wondering what was going on... That demon of shame and guilt was on the run!

Yes, we are saints and sinners, we live in a context of sin... Unclean spirits cause all sorts of destruction to us and our loved ones... The good news today is that the Kingdom of God has come near... Your sins are forgiven...

Jesus is all about that Kingdom of God. It is a teaching that doesn't destroy, but rather heals... A teaching that doesn't accuse, but rather forgives... A teaching that doesn't oppress, but makes us free... A teaching that doesn't fragment... but makes us whole.

Jesus brings that Kingdom on earth as it is in heaven... Good news indeed...
Amen.