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January 28, 2018: Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany

**Scripture: Mark 1:21-28**

<sup>21</sup>And they went to Capernaum, and when the Sabbath came, Jesus went to the synagogue there and immediately began to teach. <sup>22</sup>And the people were astounded at his teaching, because he taught them as one with authority, not like the scribes. <sup>23</sup>And immediately, there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, <sup>24</sup>and it cried out, "What business do you have with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are—the Holy One of God!" <sup>25</sup>And Jesus rebuked it, saying, "Be quiet and come out of him!" <sup>26</sup>And the unclean spirit threw the man into convulsions and crying out with a loud voice, came out of the man. <sup>27</sup>And the people were all astonished and they asked one another, "What is this? A new teaching? And with authority. He even commands the unclean spirits and they obey him." <sup>28</sup>And the news went out about him, immediately, everywhere, into all the surrounding region of Galilee.

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What do you remember about your favorite teachers?

Today's gospel story got me thinking about my own long lineage of incredible teachers -- professors, supervisors, mentors -- and how moved I have been, how astounded, by their teaching.

I remember the wild hand gestures of one of my divinity school professors -- how excited he would get in telling stories about the history of Christianity, especially Baptists -- one day accidentally throwing a pen out a second-story window.

I remember the contagious enthusiasm one of my favorite college professors had for reading and speaking Middle English -- so much that I thought it would be fun to electively take a Middle English lit class. (It was *nat.*)

I remember my third grade teacher's slip falling off while she was at the chalkboard, and how she casually stepped out of it, tossed it onto her desk, and kept on teaching. And, yes, the news went out immediately, everywhere, into all the surrounding region of my third grade classroom.

Years later, in some cases decades later, I vividly remember so many of these moments, interactions, but it is not as easy to recall what they actually said.

There's a saying, often connected to Maya Angelou, that goes: "People will forget what you said. They will forget what you did. But they will never forget how you made them feel."

Turns out, that is an expanded echo of this older version of the adage attributed to Carl Buehner: "People may forget what you said, but they will never forget how you made them feel."

Now, let's be clear, *everything* sounds better in Dr. Angelou's voice, which has been balm to all our souls, but the earlier, sparser version of the saying better fits our earliest, sparsest gospel this morning.

Because all those whose ears and mouths carried this story from Capernaum, all those re-hearing and -telling the news of Jesus in the synagogue that day may have forgotten what he *said*, but it doesn't sound like they forgot what he *did*. Or how it made people feel. That's why Mark records it almost 40 years after it happened. And it's why Suzanne told it -- so brilliantly -- today.

And so we hear about Jesus' incredible teaching -- we hear that everyone went away amazed by what he taught, the news spreading out *immediately*, everywhere -- even though Mark doesn't recall, or at least recount to us, Jesus' allegedly astounding words.

Maybe it's because there's such a sense of urgency in Mark, who sketches a fast-paced narrative with sentences that grab us and pull us forward. In today's eight verse reading, we hear the word "and" 15 times -- eight sentences beginning with the word "and" -- and three times we hear the word "immediately."

Mark seems more concerned with revealing action than revelling in words. (And some of you probably wish he were preaching today.)

Do you remember what happened, according to Mark, just before today's reading? It was the scene we heard last week: Jesus on the shore of the Sea of Galilee, at the very beginning of his ministry. Remember, in Mark's gospel, Jesus is baptized then *immediately* -- there's that word again -- driven by the Spirit into the wilderness for 40

days. He returns announcing the nearness of the kin-dom of God, and recruits four fishermen to join him -- Simon, Andrew, James, John. Jesus shouts at them from the shore, calling them from their boats, their families, the livelihoods and lives they know, saying, "Follow me... and I'll make you fishers of people."

And like naive people whose parents never taught them not to go with strangers, the first disciples follow Jesus to this fishing village of Capernaum, and on the sabbath, to the synagogue. And with Jesus' mystifying words -- "I'll make you fishers of people" -- still ringing in their ears, they, along with the crowd, witness Jesus' first public act of power. I imagine them, like the police chief in *Jaws*, with mouths open, saying, "We're gonna need a bigger boat."

Because Jesus' teaching is quite the object lesson. His first public act of power, according to Mark, is an exorcism. A casting out of unnamed and unexplained *unclean spirits*.

To be honest, my mouth was also hanging open when I first realized that this encounter was our gospel text for the day. My first thought was, "May our still-speaking God spin again and grant us another story." I just preached on an exorcism story a few months ago. What else could I say in a highly educated, 21st century Western Protestant church full of *doctors* -- PhDs if not MDs -- about *demons*? I mean, we're on Academy Road, not Amnityville Road... give me a break, lectionary.

And then I thought about the current state of things, locally, nationally and globally.

I thought about all that has gone on in the lives of so many who are dear to me over the past six months, year, couple of years, decades...

All the people and places, conditions and circumstances we prayed for this morning.

I remembered that President Trump's State of the Union address is delaying next week's episode of *This Is Us*. And I thought about what will be said and signaled in that address.

And I longed for the Holy One to come and confront it all, saying with power, "Be quiet and come out of them!"

This next part will sound familiar, if you were here in August -- and, let's be honest, many of you weren't because it's summer and there seems to be some confusion about church operating on the Durham Public Schools schedule. We're on a year-round calendar, just so you know. I shared this the last time I stood in this place and confessed that I didn't really know what to do with stories about unclean spirits and demons. In her book, *Accidental Saints*, Nadia Bolz-Weber writes:

I often wonder if, back in biblical times, people had things like epilepsy or mental illness but they didn't have the explanations provided by modern medicine and psychology like we do, so they just called it all 'demon possession.' Or if maybe there really were demons possessing people back then but, like polio and small pox, they were eradicated in modern times so it's just not something we have around anymore. Or perhaps we *do* actually still have demons today and we just find it more comfortable to use medical and scientific terms to describe the things that possess us. I honestly don't know.

But I do know that, like myself, many of my parishioners suffer from addictions and compulsions and depression. I do know that sometimes things get ahold of us, making us do things we don't want to or making us think we love things (substances, people, etc.) that are really destructive. So maybe if, in part, that is what having a demon is, maybe if it's being taken over by something destructive, then possession really is less of an anachronism and more of an epidemic.

If possession is about destructive things that get a hold of us and don't let go, we can imagine demons, or unclean spirits, and the desperate need for exorcism, can't we? If demons are what most deeply trouble and traumatize us, and therefore the people around us; if they are our wounds -- our individual wounds, our communal wounds; our personal and our systemic fears and insecurities -- which are most resistant to change, to treatment, to transformation -- if that is what unclean spirits are, they are not so foreign or obsolete. They are, in fact, all too familiar.

And who are we, who am I, to hear a story far from my own time or place or experience, and *immediately* deem it too bizarre, too difficult? That, too, is a demon to drive out.

What is Jesus teaching, with words and interactions, these first disciples, who may be seriously questioning their decision to follow? What is Jesus teaching those gathered in the synagogue in Capernaum? What is Jesus teaching those of us gathered here, you and me?

What do you hear and see? And where can you imagine yourself entering the story this morning? As one in the crowd? As one afflicted with unclean spirits?

I, for one, can imagine being in the shoes -- or sandals, or bare feet -- of both.

And I see Jesus encountering the unnamed man -- I see Jesus encountering me -- with compassion, and responding with courage and conviction to the unclean spirits that afflict and oppress.

I wonder if, like us, those gathered in the synagogue in Capernaum tended to define others and themselves by their worst moments, decisions, illnesses, by their most difficult demons.

I wonder if, like us, those gathered in the synagogue in Capernaum tended to be intimidated and overwhelmed by the unclean spirits that won't let the world, that won't let our loved ones, that won't let us go.

I wonder if we, like Jesus, are willing to say, "Be quiet and come out!" to the spirits that afflict us -- the addictions and defense mechanisms, the fears and insecurities that become our collective isms and phobias: racism and white privilege, sexism and heterosexism, our denial of religious and gender and cultural expressions that are not like our own... if we are willing to demand that these unclean spirits that oppose the kingdom of God come out of us, out of our relationships, out of our leaders and our systems and our institutions, while seeing one another, holding one another -- while seeing and holding ourselves -- with fierce compassion.

And I wonder if we, like the unnamed man, are willing to show up with what most deeply afflicts and dis-eases us so that it may be seen, so that it may loose if not lose its hold, so that we may be made whole. Not holy. Not perfect. Whole.

May it be so.