

Church on the Mall
February 1, 2015
Rev. Sarah A. Colwill
Psalm 86
Mark 1:21-28

“The Power to Heal”

Our Gospel passage this morning reads as if it comes straight from a science fiction action scene: the cosmic battle of good versus evil is unfolding before our eyes as we experience (as one commentator puts it) the invasion of the kingdom of God. Jesus is teaching in the synagogue when a man with an unclean spirit interrupts with loud protest, challenging Jesus, “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.” The demons are posing a fight, on to this Jesus’ plan. But Jesus rebukes them, “Be silent, and come out of him!” There’s convulsing, thrashing about, loud cries, screaming voices, and the possessed spirit comes out of the man. In this universal battle of good versus evil, goodness has won and Jesus’ popularity and fame spread throughout the region.

This reminds me of a recent art exhibit I visited in Chicago’s Field Museum titled, “Vodou: Sacred Powers of Haiti”. It was a fascinating exploration into the Vodou tradition; debunking myths and teaching about its practice. Part of the exhibit showed people convulsing and dancing, being possessed by sacred spirits. Or perhaps, when hearing this exorcism retold in Mark’s gospel, we make the connection back to that 1973 American horror film, “The Exorcist,” in which a priest is called upon to help rid a child of a demon who has taken over her body and soul. Or maybe the story

reminds us of encounters we have had with people on the streets who, with our quick assessment and knowledge of pop psychology, we could label mentally ill or schizophrenic or paranoid or delusional. Or perhaps we think of people who suffer from seizures, or epilepsy, when bodily control is momentarily lost. Whatever our association when hearing this healing story in Mark, we most likely focus on the dramatic demons and their convulsing and loud cries; the miracle of Jesus that casts them out. This story comes across as just not that relatable to our common, everyday experiences. We would not expect a similar scene to play out here on a Sunday morning.

But this occurrence wouldn't have been so unusual for those first century Jews that we are reading about. This whole scene is not remarkable because of a demon-possessed person, as we might first assume. This whole scene is not remarkable because of the presence of a visibly unclean spirit taking over somebody, even though it reads that way for us today.

For those first century Jews at that synagogue, this whole scene is remarkable because there is a cosmic battle between good and evil, and good has won. The heavens have broken open upon Jesus in his baptism, the kingdom of God is at hand, and evil is meeting its match. Jesus has come to proclaim this good news and is giving witness to this good news right before our eyes. Evil has manifested itself as an unclean spirit in this man's body and Jesus is casting it out. Note that the person isn't evil; the spirit is evil, and Jesus casts out the spirit, restoring the man to his true identity. This scene is

remarkable because Jesus is showing his authority: that with his presence salvation for the world has come; through him God's power renders evil powerless. Through him, the evils of the world are cast out and cured; the demons of our lives are made ineffective and weak.

The crowds are astonished, astounded, spell-bound, and blown away. First, at the beginning, by his teaching in the synagogue; what he's teaching, we're not sure, but we can assume he knew how to lead a good bible study! But they're not reacting to content, they are reacting to his authority. The Gospel writer tells us that he is teaching as one with authority.

Then – as witnesses to this exorcism – again, they announce that same authority. Jesus' ability to silence evil is setting him apart; his authority in bringing about the reign of God that overcomes darkness and wickedness is spreading throughout the countryside.

While at first-read this story is tucked away as science fiction, catalogued as some dramatic first-century miracle, we know too well that the pervasion of evil continues to plague our world and our need for God's power to render unclean spirits powerless is everywhere: bubbling up on the surface of our lives and of the world. Our world has become possessed with hatred, judgment, complacency, apathy, and violence in a way that it doesn't even make us flinch anymore. The number of women who die each year here, in the United States at the hands of her partner; the racist presumption that African-American men are violent in this country that has risen to the surface because

of Trayvon Martin, Ferguson, and Eric Garner; unarmed black men killed. The staggering rates of homelessness and poverty, with new information telling us that one in 5 children here in the United States rely on food stamps. Sexual assault on college campuses continues to be a staggering statistic with some reports claiming one in 4 college women will be assaulted during her college years. If we allow this reality to sink in, it seems our world is possessed with unclean spirits, just like that man in Mark's Gospel.

When that afflicted person shows up with that "immediacy" that Mark likes to use so much, in the synagogue, after Jesus' teaching, we can wonder if that spirit was there all along, and Jesus' insight allowed the worshippers to see it differently; more clearly; to see the world how God would see it; with compassion and care; with mercy and healing. Perhaps Jesus' teaching rubbed the haze out of their eyes and awakened them to the demons that were all around them, to which they had grown so complacent and so accustomed, the unclean spirits of the world that they had become numb towards and apathetic.

Whatever really took place on that Sabbath in the synagogue, things were starting to change. Not only is Jesus proclaiming the word of God, teaching with authority, but he is casting out the demons of the world, inextricably linking what he says with what he does. Jesus unites teaching with action; the dominance of God's love and mercy is conquering the world's evil in concrete ways. He is awakening the worshippers to God's reality that the despair and judgment, the hatred and greed, the violence and grief

that have blanketed the world are not the way things have to be. He is awakening his listeners to God's kingdom that has come to reign in their lives, at this time, now – with hope and healing, with love and compassion, with reconciliation and new possibilities.

This power to bring about God's kingdom; this power to heal the world of evil and cast out the darkness and unclean spirits that plague us is the work of our Savior. It is nothing short of a miracle. But as we read further in this Gospel, as we hear more about the immediacy of the kingdom of God and its coming in the person of Jesus Christ, we read that this work of healing is passed on to his disciples. To us! In chapter 6 Jesus' disciples are sent out, two by two, to cast out the demons of the world. The task of bringing about God's kingdom is theirs. This task of bringing about God's kingdom is ours.

This is quite a task – to be modern-day miracle workers, healing the world of unclean spirits, engaging in the cosmic battle of good versus evil, ridding our society of demons. This is quite a task – but it is ours, as disciples of Christ, as the Church, to engage. And we start where the story starts today: listening to Jesus teach, acknowledging his authority. We start with our own personal belief that Jesus is the one who reigns in our lives with power and authority. We start with our belief as a church, that Jesus is the one who guides us and gives us our direction.

There are many competing powers in the world that will beg for this kind of authority over us, and they're not necessarily evil, but our lives will be unfulfilled and our calling to discipleship will go unmet if they have our utmost obedience. What can

rule over us and guide us, what can motivate us: money, success in our careers, nationalism, our families. These are not evil things in and of themselves, but if we give authority to money, if we start to worship members of our own family above God, if we place our ultimate worth in the success of our careers – our authority no longer rests with Jesus.

When we give Jesus as our authority, he has the power to cast out demons that inflict our own souls. We know as Christians, we are not immune to unclean spirits. These demons and unclean spirits probably don't look like that shouting, convulsing spirit that plagued the man in the synagogue. But they more likely take the form of addictions and eating disorders; self-loathing or depression or anxiety or grief. Those things that hurt our souls and distort who we are as God's children: hopelessness, the bondage of regret and mistakes. There are demons that plague us from time to time that need Christ's authoritative power of healing.

And the Good News for us, is that because of Jesus' authority in our lives, these ills are cast out; because we have put our ultimate trust and obedience in him, he has the power to heal us. When our authority is money, it will not heal us when the stock market crashes. When our authority is our career, it will not heal us when we lose our job or miss that promotion. But when we place our authority in Jesus Christ, even our own demons can be healed and cast off, forgiveness, compassion, hope, and love restoring us to the people God created us to be.

With Jesus' authority in our lives, with our experience of him curing our own souls, we are called together and sent out to go and heal the world. We are given the power to heal – to show the world God's goodness and love, to reveal to the world God's justice and hope. We don't just speak of it, but we engage in this healing work as God's kingdom is revealed.

After worship we are going to hear about all the ways this congregation has been engaged in healing the world. We will rejoice in the healing work of the deacons, reaching out to those who are aging and going through hard times in our congregation. We will rejoice in the healing work of the mission committee, reaching out into impoverished places like West Kensington, supporting the ministry of Rev. Adan Mairena at West Kensington Ministry. We will rejoice in the healing work of the hospitality committee, that reaches out to passers-by, not looking for anything in return, but being a witness to God's attention, love, and care to each one of God's children. We will rejoice in the healing work of the worship committee, that prepares and plans each week a sacred place to come and be fed by God's word; a place to come and give praise to God. We will rejoice in the healing work of the corporate committee, that lays the important groundwork so we can function as an institution and as a space for people to come and gather together.

The reports we will hear during our annual meeting may seem like business as usual for the church, and in some ways it is: our usual business is to be about the

healing of the whole world, working for God's kingdom of goodness and love to overpower the ailments and evil that can take over our souls.

Today, we will gather around this communion table, summoned by Jesus Christ himself who calls us to be together, to be fed by the bread of life, to be nourished with the cup of salvation. We come here to be with one another; to be sustained together for this task of ministering to the world. May we gather with Jesus as our authority; may we gather knowing that he has the power to heal even us; may we gather with the conviction that he sends us out into the world to heal its unclean spirits and proclaim the loving, hopeful, compassionate reign of God; may we gather with the conviction that God's kingdom has come and is coming; that evil is indeed rendered powerless to the invasion of God's love. Thanks be to God. Amen.