

Dealing With Demons

Mark 1:1-21

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It's not often that we have interruptions during our worship services. It happened to me once when I was a pastor in Hamilton Township (outside of Trenton) in 1968. My student assistant, a young man studying at Princeton Seminary, had given a prophetic sermon calling for racial justice and equality. After he finished speaking and the closing hymn was sung a woman in the back row began shouting, "Communists, you're all communists." No amount of talking with her afterwards could persuade her otherwise. It was a Sunday to remember!

I know of one pastor who prays every Sunday morning before the service that something will happen that's not printed in the bulletin! Sometimes our service is so well planned and scripted that the Spirit has a hard time breaking in.

It was summer and the young preacher was taking the service while the regular minister is on vacation. And folks are impressed. He speaks clearly and well and sprinkles his sermon with bits of humor. They like that. And they nod knowingly, thinking that the young preacher will soon be in one of the prestigious pulpits in the large cities.

But they quickly forget about all that because a dirty, old, disheveled fellow in the back row starts yelling and screaming and causing a ruckus. "You can't fool us!" he yells, "Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are! You are the Holy One of God."

A few of the stronger men move toward the noisy stranger. They will do the appropriate thing. They will escort him gently into the hall, out of sight and sound so that the church service can go on. They will give him a sandwich and a cup of coffee while they decide which of the social agencies in town could meet his needs.

Except that the young preacher doesn't let that happen. He strides down the aisle to the back of the church and crouches down in front of the man from the streets. The man's hands are trembling. He is breathing deeply and hard. There is firmness, gentleness and passionate intensity in the way the young preacher holds the old man's hands and the way he looks into the confused and tired eyes.

The preacher has been well-educated in one of the best theological schools. His training included a lot of psychology. So he knows what is going on and could easily use professional language to impress the bystanders. But instead, the preacher uses language the man will understand. "Shhhhh!" the preacher whispered. Then he leans over, his face almost touching the face of the man from the streets – "It's going to be OK. You've got something bad down in your craw and it needs to come out." Then in a huge voice preacher shouts, "Evil spirit! Stop hurting this man! Come out!"

The man breathes deeply. You could hear a pin drop in the church. "We're going to sing a song now," the young preacher said to the old man very quietly. "Then we'll get you some lunch. After that we can sit down together over a coffee and find out what else you need."

As they stand around with their coffee cups after the service, the folks talk about only one thing – the way the preacher had handled a potentially embarrassing situation. None of them remembered a thing he had said in the sermon.

The young preacher stood off to one side. He shook his head in sadness and wonder. What the people had missed most of all, was that this dirty, disturbed, disheveled man from the streets was the only one who knew anything about the call – the power of God to clean up the mess within that man and set him free.

That is what was happening in the gospel lesson from Mark this morning. Mark's gospel gets right to the point. There's no beautiful Christmas story at the beginning of the Gospel of Mark. He gets right to the point. There is Jesus being baptized by John and thrust into the wilderness for 40 days. Then, there he is beside the Sea of Galilee calling his fisherman disciples and preaching that "the Kingdom of God is near." After that it's straight to the synagogue at Capernaum where he astonishes the worshippers by preaching and teaching with authority - there was something about him that made people realize that he was no ordinary substitute preacher ! And as he was teaching a man, who Mark describes as having an evil spirit within him, interrupts by screaming, "What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Are you here to destroy us? I know who you are: you are God's holy messenger!"

Mark writes that "Jesus commanded the spirit, "Be quiet, and come out of the man!"

The evil spirit (the demon) shook the man hard, gave a loud scream, and came out of him."

The people are dumbstruck. Amazed. "What is this?" they said to each other. A new kind of teaching? Who is this Jesus that he has authority over evil spirits and they obey him.?"

Who indeed? Just what is happening here? Well, for one thing, I don't believe in demons, but I do believe in the daemonic; the power of evil. And I believe fervently that the power of evil can control us, lock us up tight, create havoc within us - and sometime it can be so strong and all encompassing that it takes over. Think of the children's sermon. Sometimes the mess we make is so great that it like one of those episodes on that TV series on people who are hoarders. The stuff get so immense that we become paralyzed to do anything about it. It takes an intervention by family and friends and maybe even a TV show to clean up our mess. Well, life can be like that. We've done something we feel guilty about - or we've failed to do something we should have done and it not only bothers us, it beats us down and takes over our life. We become caged in; imprisoned by the demons of our own making. Like the old person in the commercial crying, "I've fallen and I can't get up!"

I know of a person who has been in a mental health facility for more than 6 years and he doesn't want to leave. He did something sexual when he was a young teenager, and a lot of kids experiment at that age. But he has never forgiven himself, and both as punishment, and perhaps to prevent himself from ever doing something like that again, he has chosen to live confined in the safety of the hospital. And no, he refuses to speak to any kind of counselor who might be able to help him. He is imprisoned by demons of his own creation, and they have him imprisoned. I am convinced that only the cleansing, forgiving power of faith plus good counseling can set him free

So what are we dealing with here in this passage. We are dealing with the power, the authority of Jesus to set us free from those demons which haunt our lives and prevent us from being the people God intended us to be - and take them to the Cross. Free to love feel God's love in return; free in that love to accept and love ourselves and to love one another. Free to use the good gifts that God has given us to work for a better world. Free to experience joy and happiness and to live responsibly.

So brothers and sisters, I pray that you feel that love within your lives - and look forward to those times when something not printed in the bulletin happens during the service.