

Deuteronomy 18:15-20 ~ Mark 1:21-28  
*The Time is Now: Jesus' Call to Action (Part 2): What is this?*  
 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Epiphany ~ January 31, 2021  
 The Rev. Dr. Laurie Brubaker Davis

*Introduction to Gospel Text:*

Yes, we are still in the first chapter of Mark, picking up right where we left off last week. Flanked with his four fresh recruits: Simon and Andrew, James and John, Jesus heads to Capernaum, where he will start his ministry. In what setting do you suppose he might choose to do that? Jesus goes to church on a Sunday morning. Well, actually it's a synagogue on the sabbath, but same idea. Traditional setting for a Rabbi. An altogether appropriate, expected place for him to begin his teaching ministry. All four gospels locate his first gig at Capernaum, by the sea. And all four record what a stir his teaching caused, although we know nothing of what he taught that day—no specific beatitudes, no parables or stories are recorded. But in Luke and Mark, we get the story of what he *did* in the synagogue that day. Perhaps the show was also the tell. Let's have a listen and see what we see.

*Sermon:*

When I was pastoring a church in Springfield, Ohio about fifteen years ago, there was a wonderful woman with a wry wit there named Laura Jefferis. She generously volunteered her time to come into the church office to record worship attendance every week. Laura had a middle-aged son who needed to reach his mom one day, so he called the church office when it was closed, and got the outgoing message. It ended as most church office phones do with the direction, "if you are having a pastoral emergency, please call Pastor Laurie Davis at the following number." To which he replied, "What in the world is a *pastoral emergency*? Do you mean if you need an exorcism or something?"

I will tell you that exorcisms are *not* a part of the curriculum at any Presbyterian seminary I know. But perhaps they should be. In our gospel story today, it appears that Jesus had a "pastoral emergency" on his hands right in the middle of church on his first day on the job. Clearly something happened on that first recorded day in Jesus' ministry that signified his power, his authority and what he came to earth to use it for. As true prophets before him, Jesus' teaching unsettled and disoriented the faithful people who had gathered in the synagogue that day.

We are told that after the unclean spirit came out of the man, all the people kept asking one another: "What is this?" We can't know because we weren't there, what the tone of that murmur was. *Fear, excitement, confusion?* I'm guessing all of the above. We've heard this question before in the Bible—other times when God breaks in with something they didn't expect. Something, as my mom would say, "they didn't have hooks in their brains to hang it on." Back in the wilderness in Exodus, when the whole congregation of Israelites complained against Moses and Aaron because they were getting really hungry, God provided an odd kind of food they had never witnessed before. He rained down on them manna from heaven that feed them day after day. The word "manna" literally means "what is it"? They were baffled by God's provision.

Here in the synagogue, on Jesus' first day, they see something they haven't seen before in Christ, and so they ask "What is this?" We will see that same question again and again as Jesus continues to astound and amaze, and I would add confound them. Their awe at the power of Love and Light, of Divine Compassion and Justice: this is a *good* kind of fear, as it is written, "The fear of the Lord, is the beginning of wisdom." (Proverbs 1:7, Psalm 111:10) I think what they saw that day in the synagogue scared them. It put the "fear of the Lord" in them. As they kept on asking one another, "What is this?"

You may also be wondering, "What is this?" What is this teaching us, or inviting us to do or not to do, today? I will begin with two ways this story has been understood that are "not it." Definitely not all of it. They fall short and can confuse us. The first may satisfy our need for a plausible explanation, but diminishes the fullness of this gospel story. When we read that the man was "convulsing" and how the unclean spirit subsided quickly, our modern minds may leap to the conclusion, "Oh, Jesus cured a man who suffered an epileptic seizure during church." Whether a seizure was part of what went on that day or not, we will never know. If we settle with this thin interpretation it may satisfy our rational desire to simply "explain it" but we miss the larger message about the earth-changing Good News now at hand, on the loose in Jesus.

The second way this story can mislead and even do damage, is by conflating mental illness with demonic possession. I want to be clear: mental illness is *not* a sign that we are possessed by an evil spirit, or being punished by God. Not then, and not now. I do take heart that Jesus' first healing in Mark's narrative was of some sort of mental episode. And I take this as a challenge to us, as a church, to recognize the ways we avoid or stigmatize mental illness. Rather than stigmatize or deny it, this scripture calls us to address all forms of mental and spiritual illness as an affliction at the heart of Jesus' ministry. Taken broadly, it is an affliction that honestly, we all share. Let's be honest, don't we all have "inner demons" we deal with in one way or another?

The good news is that Jesus does not deny the struggle, in fact we know that while he walked this earth, from his first forty days in the wilderness right after his baptism, to his death on the cross: Jesus wrestled and struggled with "inner demons" challenging his Spirit. And he rebuked what he recognized as Satan, out of the voice of Peter, one of his closest disciples. Call them what you will, but Jesus went through the valley, the lonesome valley again and again. And Jesus is with us, whenever we find are sinking down under the weight of our own "inner demons."

The other great news I see in this story, is that Jesus embraced the fullness of the man in the synagogue with the unclean spirit. Although there was an unclean spirit inside of him that seized up at that moment: this wasn't the man's whole story. Jesus could free him and he did. We don't know the man's name. This unnamed man has been commonly referred to as the "demoniac." But perhaps we should think of a better name for him. We are still talking about him this sabbath, because of how they saw Jesus transform him in the synagogue that sabbath day. Jesus healed and restored the man so that his light could shine again.

So, if it's not just the healing of a man suffering an epileptic seizure, and nor is it teaching us that mental illness is a form of demonic possession, what is this? What was the larger power dynamic at play that lit them all up? I think the thing that made this go viral, in a 1<sup>st</sup> century sort of way was this. In the center of their sabbath, in the center of their holy synagogue, Jesus revealed what he meant when he proclaimed that the kingdom of God was at hand. Jesus had come to reset the religious institution of his time to the prophetic work of rooting out evil—individual and systemic. Jesus was taking up the work of the prophets before him and getting ready to move the needle. No more waiting around for the Messiah to appear. Look out: “I am here, and now is the time, let's go!”

Here today, in 2021, if Jesus were in our church, what evil, what hate, what darkness would he be calling us to exorcise from within? What action is he calling us to do? In 2017 a group of American theologians and pastors (and I would say prophets) wrote a public declaration titled, “Reclaiming Jesus: A Confession of Faith in a Time of Crisis.” It speaks of what we believe and therefore reject, or you could say, what we need to *exorcise* from our lives as individuals, as a church, as a nation. Friends, this is not just a pastoral emergency, it is also a prophetic one to which we are *all* called to respond. You will hear resonances in this declaration with our FPC commitment to being a Matthew 25 church. Here is what they declared: *“First, ‘we believe’ that everyone is created in God’s image, and ‘therefore, we reject’ nationalism. Second, ‘we believe’ we are one body in Christ, and ‘therefore, we reject’ misogyny, sexual harassment, and any other form of oppression against anyone. Third, ‘we believe’ that how we treat the most vulnerable in society is how we treat Christ, and ‘therefore, we reject’ political language and policies that ‘debase and abandon’ them. Fourth, ‘we believe’ that truthfulness is ‘morally central’ to personal and public life, and ‘therefore we reject’ the lying and incivility that is increasingly in our civil life. Fifth, ‘we believe’ that Christ models servanthood rather than domination, and ‘therefore, we reject’ any form of authoritarian political rule. Sixth, ‘we believe’ Jesus when he tells Christians to go to all nations and make disciple, and ‘therefore, we reject’ American exceptionalism ideology as a ‘theological heresy.”*

How are we doing on these six kinds of “exorcisms” at FPC? We have others who will speak today to respond this question. We have a Minute for Mission by Dan Crump, about something we can begin tomorrow called an “Equity Challenge,” and a concrete way to take part in “courageous conversations” that will build up our civil life together. We will also hear a message from Tracy Olson about our “REUNIR” project that advocates for some of the most vulnerable and invisible here in our midst: children separated from their parents at the Southern border. I invite you also to take part in our class at 11:00 where the vital signs of our Marshfield area community will be revealed and interpreted, to help us see where we can continue Jesus’ healing work right here in our neighborhood. Let us heed Jesus’ call to action. Yes, the time is now. Yes, that’s what this is.

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<sup>i</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *An On-Going Imagination: A Conversation about Scripture, Faith, and the Thickness of Relationship*, (Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville, KY, 2019), p.74.