

Today we continue our series on the gospel of Mark that we began last week. Last week I commented that Mark begins with a bang and we see more of that this week. Nothing gentle about the opening chapter of Mark. We have the ministry of John the Baptist. We have the baptism of Jesus and then the temptation of Jesus by Satan in the wilderness. We quickly move to the arrest of John, the calling of the disciples, and then today's scene of teaching and healing in the synagogue in Capernaum. Six scenes right off the bat.

It takes both gospel writers Matthew and Luke almost 5 chapters before they get this far in the life of Jesus. The gospel of Mark is a gospel of action. If you want to read reflections about what Jesus says and why, you need to turn to Matthew and Luke. But if action is what you want in a gospel, action is what you get in Mark.

The scripture today has a story within a story. The scene opens in the synagogue in Capernaum. When I was in Israel 2 summers ago, I was able to visit the synagogue in Capernaum. And this is the scene. Capernaum is a small coastal town located right along the shoreline of the northern portion of the Sea of Galilee. And the synagogue is not like what we would think about a church looking like today.

There was a big open space in the middle with benches around the edges where people would sit. So imagine a scene where Jesus is standing in this fellowship hall type of room and people are sitting around the edge of the room listening to what he has to say.

Mark doesn't tell us what Jesus is saying. The content of Jesus' teaching is apparently not important to Mark. Mark is concerned with the action. But Mark does note that the listeners are impressed because unlike the other synagogue teachers, Jesus teaches as one with authority. As one who commands attention.

While Jesus is teaching, a man in the synagogue described as a man with an unclean spirit, cries out to Jesus, "what have you to do with us, Jesus? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are. You are the Holy One of God."

The church people can't quite figure out who Jesus is. But this man who is covered with an unclean spirit knows exactly who Jesus is. Sometimes the people most disconnected from Jesus have a whole lot more clarity about who Jesus is than folks who claim allegiance to Jesus. Jesus rebukes the spirit and calls the spirit out. Jesus shows greater power than any evil in the world. The spirit is removed and the man is healed.

Now we modern readers read these stories of miracles and think we are too sophisticated for these pre-enlightenment events. We explain them all away so that Jesus comes across as just some charismatic guy able to manipulate people into believing things that didn't really happen.

But as Fred Craddock says, "not believing in demons has hardly eradicated evil in the world." Healing stories do not need to be rationalized. Healing stories are an invitation. An invitation to experience the power of the Christ.

So what is the power in this story? This is an event which portrays for us that there is good in the world and that there is evil in the world. And many of us face choices every day where good and evil invite us into their world.

There's an old Native American story about a chief instructing some braves about the struggle within. "It is like two dogs fighting inside of us," the chief told them. "There is one good dog who wants to do the right and the other dog wants to do the wrong. Sometimes the good dog seems stronger and is winning the fight. But sometimes the bad dog is stronger and wrong is winning the fight."

"Who is going to win in the end?" a young brave asks. "'The one you feed,'" the chief answered.

Dianne Bergant provides a poignant reflection on the demons that hold us in bondage: "We are caught in dysfunction and sin, and try as we may, we do not seem able to rid ourselves of their shackles. We live in the midst of the battle between good and evil, the struggle of human finitude and failure.

We may begin with good intentions, but we are so often sidetracked or derailed along the way. We are plunged into the throes of human suffering and pain, and there seems to be no escaping from it....The demonic seduces us in more ways than we can count, and we are often caught in its web before we recognize what has happened."

My hunch is that some of us may be caught in demonic webs which we are not sure how to get out of. If it is not you then it may be a friend, a co-worker, a family member, or someone sitting next to you today.

And whether you admit to it or not, you may be feeding the wrong day. I think about people that are enablers. The person who buys the beer for the alcoholic. The person who buys the cigarettes for the chain smoker. The child who tried to make peace between two warring parents. The spouse who explains away their spouse's abusive behavior. The spouse who ignores what they know or suspect their spouse is doing.

Exorcising those demons may seem impossible to you right now. And this story from the gospel of Mark teaches us that yes; we are powerless to the demons in the world.

However, there is someone who is more powerful than any evil in the world.

The question for us is this. Are we willing to really trust and follow the Christ? Do we feed the dog that leads to wrong? Do we feed the dog that leads to right? The choice is ours. But remember. Christ is more powerful than any evil in the world. AMEN.

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-London, Jeffrey, "The Power of Authority" and found at [http://www.lectionary.org/Sermons/London/Mark/Mark\\_01.21-28\\_Authority.htm](http://www.lectionary.org/Sermons/London/Mark/Mark_01.21-28_Authority.htm)

-Text: Mark 1:21-28

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