

“Satan, Your Kingdom Must Come Down”

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St. Paul’s UCC Church

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Mark 1:21-45

They went to Capernaum; and when the Sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught. They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes. Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, and he cried out, “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.” But Jesus rebuked him, saying, “Be silent, and come out of him!” And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him. They were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, “What is this? A new teaching—with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him.” At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.

As soon as they left the synagogue, they entered the house of Simon and Andrew, with James and John. Now Simon’s mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they told him about her at once. He came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them.

That evening, at sundown, they brought to him all who were sick or possessed with demons. And the whole city was gathered around the door. And he cured many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons; and he would not permit the demons to speak, because they knew him. In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed. And Simon and his companions hunted for him. When they found him, they said to him, “Everyone is searching for you.” He answered, “Let us go on to the neighboring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do.” And he went throughout Galilee, proclaiming the message in their synagogues and casting out demons.

A leper came to him begging him, and kneeling he said to him, “If you choose, you can make me clean.” Moved with pity, Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, and said to him, “I do choose. Be made clean!” Immediately the leprosy left him, and he was made clean. After sternly warning him he sent him away at once, saying to him, “See that you say nothing to anyone; but go, show yourself to the priest, and offer for your cleansing what Moses commanded, as a testimony to them.” But he went out and began to proclaim it freely, and to spread the word, so that Jesus could no longer go

into a town openly, but stayed out in the country; and people came to him from every quarter.

Happy Epiphany, everyone! We have arrived today at the point in our Narrative Lectionary (the assigned reading from the wider church that we more or less follow) where we finally get to hear the Gospel stories from the New Testament. Yay! Just a quick review here: the Narrative Lectionary is a collection of scripture passages to be heard, and preached from, in canonical order, from Genesis to Revelation. So we don't skip around all over the place with the Narrative Lectionary (for the most part); we more or less start at the beginning and we go, in order, to the end.

All throughout the fall and for some of Advent, we read from the Old Testament – from the earliest stories of God's people through the histories, writings and prophets – and now, it's time for the stories of God-in-the-flesh, Emmanuel, Jesus the Christ. And, in *this* year of the Narrative Lectionary, we will read these stories from the Gospel according to Mark.

So here we are at the beginning of the Gospel according to Mark... although notice we're not at the *very* beginning. Before verse 21 (where we start from today), a lot has already happened: Jesus was baptized by John in the River Jordan. And right after that, he starts calling his first disciples.

Today, we see Jesus at the beginning of his earthly ministry. He has already started healing lots and lots of people, curing folks of unclean spirits, proclaiming the Gospel everywhere he can.

...And it's that "unclean spirits" part of the story that I'd really like to focus on today.

"Satan, Your Kingdom Must Come Down" (traditional spiritual)

Satan, your kingdom must come down (2x)

I heard the voice of Jesus' say: Satan, your kingdom must come down.

Gonna pray until they tear your kingdom down...

Gonna shout until they tear your kingdom down...

Unclean spirits. Possessions. Demons. I would venture that there are a lot of different opinions among us about this stuff. Some of us may believe in literal demons; some of us may be a bit more skeptical. But though I might have questions about demons, I do know what it's like to feel unclean. I think a lot of us probably do.

Maybe it's something we've done to someone else that makes us feel dirty and shame-filled and guilty; maybe it's something someone did to us. Maybe it's one thing in

particular we can never seem to rid ourselves of; maybe it's a series of things that haunt us. Whatever the case may be, wherever this unclean feeling may come from, the extent to which we go to cover it up is remarkable.

Think back to the beginning, way back in Genesis. In the beginning, Adam and Eve were naked, exposed before God and one another. But they were naked... *without shame*. In the beginning, Adam and Eve could stand honestly, before God, before one another, with nothing to be ashamed of, with nothing to hide. They lived in the truth. But then sin and shame entered the picture, and suddenly Adam and Eve did not want to be naked anymore. They made clothes. They started hiding – hiding from God, hiding from each other, probably even hiding from themselves.

And these days, things aren't much different. Because, let's be honest: we're still hiding. We still put on these elaborate disguises, as we try to forget what we've done or what's been done to us, as we try to convince other people that we are someone we're not. We live our lives terrified that someone might catch a glimpse of the real me, the real you, the broken, sinful, needy, neurotic, wounded person who hides behind the mask. We live in the fear that if we show our true selves, we will be rejected and unloved and alone.

This is the bind of human existence: We lock our innermost selves away, yet all the while our innermost selves are crying out to be known, to be made clean, and to be loved.

Brené Brown, a writer and researcher most famous for her work around human vulnerability and shame, says this: "Shame cannot survive being spoken, and being met with empathy." In other words, shame cannot survive, it cannot *stand*, two things: being spoken out loud, being dragged out into the light; and it cannot stand being met with empathy, compassion, love, or tenderness. Shame cannot survive being seen; and shame cannot survive being loved.

And these are the two things that Jesus offers every single one of us.

In our story for this morning, Jesus speaks the leper's shame out into the light. Today Jesus commands the unclean spirits, "Come out!" "Come out!" And with these words, Jesus drags all the ugly, hidden, shameful things out into plain sight. Jesus is cutting through the disguises here. Jesus is exposing it all to the plain light of day, laying bare the hidden truths, the secrets, and the brokenness buried deep. "Come out!" Jesus says. "I see you." And when Jesus sees, he meets everything in his gaze with light and with healing.

...Which leads us to the second thing Jesus offers the leper. Jesus sees the leper for who he really is – brokenness and beauty, warts and wonders – and *Jesus loves him*. Jesus loves *all of him*. "If you so choose, you can make me clean," the leper says to Jesus. Jesus stretches out his hand and touches him with the utmost of tenderness, saying, "I do choose. Be made clean!" Jesus meets the leper's shame with empathy, love and compassion, and the leper is healed.

“Come out! Be made clean!” Did you hear? Shame does not have to have the last word with you, with me, with any of us. Jesus speaks the shame into the light. And he does it with compassion, empathy, and love. Shame cannot stand, it cannot survive, this. Jesus has the word that makes us clean, that takes away all our shame, that makes us feel whole and worthy and loveable again. Jesus chooses to do it. And we are made well.

“You Are Mine” (David Haas)

I will come to you in the silence
I will lift you from all your fear
You will hear My voice
I claim you as My choice
Be still, and know I am here

Do not be afraid, I am with you
I have called you each by name
Come and follow Me
I will bring you home
I love you and you are mine

I am strength for all the despairing
Healing for the ones who dwell in shame
All the blind will see, the lame will all run free
And all will know My name

Refrain

I am the Word that leads all to freedom
I am the peace the world cannot give
I will call your name, embracing all your pain
Stand up, now, walk, and live!

Refrain

Jesus sees us for who we are, shedding light on our shame and all the things we hide from the world; and he loves us, not *despite* it all, but through it all. My hope is that here in the church, we would learn that even our deepest, darkest secrets are not beyond the healing touch of God. My desire is that together, we would find that our innermost selves are precious in God’s sight, warts and all. And my deepest prayer is that we would start to believe that we never even had to hide in the first place, that God’s arms have always been open to embrace us.

Thanks be to God.