

Mending the World
Mark 1: 21-28
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It's an understatement to say that this was not your typical synagogue service. In fact it was one for the ages, so much so, that what happened that day is recorded for posterity in the Gospel of Mark as the inauguration of Jesus' public ministry.

Jesus and his newly called disciples have left the seaside shores and come to the village of Capernaum. They enter the synagogue, a place of security and tradition, where religious teachings are shared. Here on the Sabbath, Jesus launches his public ministry in the company of the gathered congregation, teaching them with a bold authority that amazes all who hear him.

Jesus' powerful words are not only fresh to the ears of the gathered faithful, but they also disrupt the hidden presence of evil lurking among them. A fight breaks out between Jesus and a man who is there, a man with an "unclean" spirit, or a spirit contrary to God.

Jesus does not shy away from the fight. Rather, he demonstrates his willingness to confront and call out this destructive presence that is not of God. Rather than ignore him, Jesus shows compassion towards the man, engaging head on with the demonic spirit possessing him. This is a cosmic showdown between the forces of good and evil. And it really isn't a fair fight.

The man isn't the only one possessed by a spirit. So too is Jesus possessed by God's own Spirit. Before beginning his ministry, Jesus is baptized in the Jordan. Mark tells us: "*As Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove upon him.*" (Mark 1:10) The power of the unclean spirit that possesses this man is no match for the power of God's Spirit that possesses Jesus.

The prominent theme of Mark's gospel centers on a particular verse in chapter one, where Jesus proclaims: "*The time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God has come near! Repent and believe the good news!*" (Mark 1:15). Right out of the gate, in the holy setting of the synagogue, Jesus shows us what it looks like

when the heavens tear open and God's kingdom breaks in. With a voice of authority, Jesus calls out the unclean spirit, so that the man can instead be possessed by the Holy Spirit.

Jesus' word is liberating and powerful. "Jesus' authority is not only in his teaching, but also in his action. The term 'authority' is understood as 'divine power'. And this divine power is the power that Christ will transmit to his disciples."¹

This week I stepped on a button lying on the carpet in my office. When I picked it up and examined it, I realized that it fell off my pulpit robe. After 38 years, my pulpit robe is showing its age. From the outside you don't notice the tears in the lining or the missing buttons. You don't see how sorely it is in need of mending. My robe is a metaphor for lives, communities, and systems that appear respectable, but that are deteriorating within, possessed by unholy forces.

There is no indication that the Capernaum congregation would have known from his outward appearance that this man was being tormented by demons within. They seem genuinely shocked and amazed when Jesus' teaching disturbs and exposes the demonic spirit that binds him. They are astounded when Jesus drives it out, delivering the man from forces that defiled in him the image of God in which he was created.

Steve Garnaas-Holmes reflects upon what Jesus does for this man and for us when he heals and delivers us from forces not of God that hold power over us.

*"Every healing by Jesus is a cosmic act,
an insurrection against the Empire of fear and death.
Jesus looks into you,
hears the demons that steal your voice,
and sees in you the universe
and its longing for healing.
And that is what He heals.
He speaks to what is deep within,
a word that is a bit of the mending of the world."²*

Like the man in Mark's story, we too are in need of God's healing power. We need to hear Jesus' voice speaking to all that is unholy deep within us; within those we love and within a nation gripped by demons of systemic racism and political divisions. We need to hear a word of deliverance, that mends what tears us apart, and by so doing contributes to the mending of the world.

Exposing unholy truths about us individually and collectively is painful yet necessary if we are to ever be delivered. What is concealed cannot be healed. This is hard and holy work to surface and name the demons that seek to destroy us, that pull us from God.

“Jesus shows us through this story the blessing that comes when we face the chaos rather than turning away. It is the blessing of release from bondage to that which will destroy us. The blessing restores us to life and wholeness.”³

Through Jesus, God’s kingdom breaks in, crossing boundaries, mending what is torn, liberating people and systems from powers and afflictions that prevent them from flourishing. If we take nothing else away from this story, let it be to hear Jesus inviting us to stop assuming that “*the way things are*” is “*the way things have to be*”.

Twenty two year old, Amanda Gorman, national poet laureate, grew up in South Central Los Angeles attending St. Brigid Catholic Church: listening to the teachings of Jesus, sharing in the sacraments and singing in the youth choir. She was invited to read her poem, “*The Hill We Climb*”, at Joe Biden’s inauguration. Through her poem, which she finished after witnessing the siege on the Capitol, she uses the power of her voice to expose demons of disunity and division that threaten our nation. She uses her voice to call us into God’s light, to become our better selves in the way of Jesus. Listen to a few lines from her poem:

*We've learned that quiet isn't always peace,
and the norms and notions
of what just is
isn't always just-ice.*

*We will rebuild, reconcile and recover.
And every known nook of our nation and
every corner called our country,
our people diverse and beautiful will emerge,
battered and beautiful.
When day comes we step out of the shade,
aflame and unafraid,
the new dawn blooms as we free it.
For there is always light,
if only we're brave enough to see it.
If only we're brave enough to be it.⁴*

In his life, death and resurrection, Jesus inaugurated God's kingdom, opening for us a future with possibility and hope. By the Holy Spirit given to us, Jesus empowers us to be his disciples, to be light, to be channels for God's grace, to live for God's kingdom.

Through the chaos of these days, may we listen to Jesus' voice and through his voice find the power of our own voice, to confront unholy demons that harm and pull us from God and from one another. And may God's healing grace and power at work in us, continue to inspire and amaze those who are watching!

In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

1 Ofelia Ortega, *Feasting on the Word Year B*, p. 312

2 Steve Garnaas-Holmes, *Unfolding Light*, www.unfoldinglight.net

3 Jan Richardson, *The Painted Prayerbook*, <http://paintedprayerbook.com/2012/01/24/epiphany-4-blessing-in-the-chaos/>

4 Amanda Gorman, *The Hill We Climb*, <https://www.cnbc.com/2021/01/20/amanda-gormans-inaugural-poem-the-hill-we-climb-full-text.html>