

“—with authority!”

Mark 1:21-28

²¹They (Jesus and the four fisherman he had called to follow him) went to Capernaum; and when the sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught. ²²They (all in the synagogue) were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes. ²³Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, ²⁴and 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.” ²⁵But Jesus rebuked him, saying, “Be silent, and come out of him!” ²⁶And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him. ²⁷They 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.” ²⁸At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.

That day in the synagogue no doubt stuck in people’s minds for the rest of their lives. I wonder if you remember a particular worship service, one that surprised you, that did not go as you expected, that you will never forget? (pause to listen...)

I recall some surprises...a fainting bride, a fainting groomsman. In the first congregation I served, during a wedding I asked what we always asked in those days: “If anyone can find just cause why this man and this woman should not be joined in holy matrimony, let him now speak or forever hold his peace.” A voice spoke, “I do.” Deeper silence fell over the gathered guests. I stood immobilized. The bride whispered to me, “It’s my dad.” Then I recalled that during premarital counseling she had told me her dad would be at the wedding and that he had dementia. So I forged ahead. I’ve wondered since, though, if I should have had a brief recess and gone to the pastor’s study with the couple to listen to her dad.

In the second congregation I served we focused one year during the Sundays in Lent on people with Jesus during his arrest and trial and crucifixion. Wanting to help folks remember the scene of Peter and his denial, I asked one of our farmers to bring a rooster to worship. It was in a cage on a bale of straw in the chancel. Now the rooster had not been trained to crow on cue, so it remained silent when we read the gospel but at other times it added its hearty song as we worshipped, not a welcome interruption.

What would be an unwelcome interruption for you here today? What would unsettle you, make you squirm, perhaps even cause you to not return? A new order of worship? Too many new hymns? Never any new hymns? A child making too much noise? Too few children in worship? A sermon that you hit you wrong? A video image you felt inappropriate?

In the gospel reading Jesus and those others in the synagogue expected some scripture reading and teaching. That always happened. It seems no one expected

Jesus to teach, and, when he did, his teaching astounded. He taught with an authority unlike any they had ever experienced.

Then a second surprise. A screaming man, calling Jesus by name, calling Jesus the Holy One of God. No one like that, no person with an unclean spirit, should come into the holy place of worship! That makes me wonder...who would offend us by showing up with us at Covenant? Who would make us uncomfortable, draw our sideways glances, bring out whispered comments to someone next to us, cause us to guess why they showed up? Lifestyles, reputations, social class, ethnic backgrounds, appearance...one or all of these might offend us if we are honest. But back to the crowd at the synagogue with Jesus. What were they thinking? Synagogue security had not done its job. We need the ushers to act quickly and restore peace to our space. But before anyone could act, Jesus spoke, again with authority. *"Be silent, and come out of him!"* Convulsing and screaming...then newness, release, freedom, restoration to community, welcome.

In our supposedly sophisticated, enlightened age, we scratch our heads and blow off unclean spirits. We look for a medical explanation or a psychiatric diagnosis. Yet in reality we who gather here may not want Jesus to get too close to us. *"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."*

Stephanie has a problem. She feels lots of stress as a parent, a wife, a full-time employ. She has chosen to relax with a drink after work, but that has not satisfied. Now she keeps bottles hidden in several places in the house. She wants help, but she doesn't want help.

Theron has a problem. He spends lots of time on the computer. He gets upset when his kids interrupt him. They wonder why he prefers the screen over them. But the time is only a small part of the problem. The content has become much more the problem. He can't admit to the reality. If he does, he will become one of the 10% of adults admitting to Internet sexual addiction. He wants help, but he doesn't want help.

Are Stephanie and Theron possessed? David Lose, a pastor, shared this: *I have to admit that not only is possession not quite as foreign an event as I might have thought, but that I actually have first hand experience with it. I have, that is, on occasion been possessed by anger at a colleague or family member that has led me to say and do things I regret. I have been possessed by jealousy and envy that had led me to use my resources in ways I regret. And that's just the beginning. And can you, honestly, tell me that you haven't had these experiences also, when you feel possessed by something that is so clearly not the Spirit of God blessing us to be a blessing to others?*

...for some of us the experience of possession is even greater and more damaging than what I've described, as we have felt possessed by addictions to alcohol, drugs, gambling, shopping, or pornography. Or maybe it's a hidden but pervasive prejudice

that keeps us captive. Or maybe we've been possessed by more society-approved unclean spirits like workaholism, affluenza, or greed.

The Jesus we meet in the gospel acts with authority in two ways...teaching and driving out an unclean spirit. We hear nothing about the content of his teaching but we witness the results of his action. Jesus restores the man to the life God wants, a life in community, a life free from what keeps him trapped. The first words of Jesus in Mark's gospel declared, *"The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news."* Now in his first appearance in the synagogue, Jesus shows the presence of the kingdom of God. Jesus brings the kingdom of God on earth in his words and his actions. He opposes the forces of evil which rob the children of God of all that God hopes and intends for them. He frees those God loves from the powers that diminish and demean them.

Sisters and brothers, do not hold back your cry for help. Bring what traps you to Jesus, yearning for freedom. Freedom can be painful and wrenching, like being born, like dying. But know that whatever burdens you, oppresses you, traps you, matters to God. Dare to face Jesus and call on him, even if you kick and scream. Jesus seeks to set you free. In him, the kingdom of God has come near. Today. He gives new life, now and here, with authority!