**Sermon for January 27, 2024**

*“You and I built a fire  
From the parts of us we never wanna see again  
And we watched it burn all night despite the rain  
In the morning most our dragons still were not slain”*

Craig Minowa lyrics from “The Firefly and the Snake” c. 2022

If you knew someone who could cast out all your inner demons with a word would you run toward them and embrace them or would you run away as fast and far as you can?

The early members of Alcoholics Anonymous soon learned that if you take the alcohol out of a person, what you are left with is the “ick”; the traumas and habits and ways of being and thinking that each person was self-medicating with alcohol or developed in order to continue in that life. The original six steps soon became twelve, including two new ones dealing with our inner demons: step six, “Were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character.” and step seven, “Humbly asked Him to remove our shortcomings.” They soon discovered that people have great difficulty changing these character traits on their own and that many of us are quite fond of our inner demons and want to hang on to them. Becoming entirely ready to have God remove these defects of character is not as easy as it sounds.

Which leads me to a lot of questions about the man with an unclean spirit. What was that spirit? Did he want it to be cast out? How did he feel about what Jesus did? And what happened afterwards? Did he remain demon-free or did new ones come to take the place of the one that was cast out?

We will not find those answers in this text, because it really isn’t about the man Jesus healed. It is a part of the fast paced “reveal” of Jesus in the first chapter of Mark. It is showing us who Jesus is and what Jesus can do.

Let’s review the chapter so you can see what I mean. Mark announces this is the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, then we have:

-a prophecy from Isaiah about a messenger

-John the Baptist telling people that one more powerful is coming

-the Holy Spirit and Creator affirming/revealing Jesus’ identity at his baptism

-forty days of wrestling with Satan in the wilderness with the wild beasts and angels

-John’s arrest leading Jesus to announce the Kingdom of God is near

-the first disciples are called

-today’s text

This gospel selection starts with Jesus entering the Synagogue in Capernaum. If you’ve been there, you’ve seen that Peter’s house is essentially across the street from the synagogue. Jesus didn’t have very far to go. At the synagogue, people were amazed at his teaching, because instead of citing the teachers of the past, he taught directly, as one with authority. Suddenly a voice cries 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!” Jesus rebukes that spirit and commands it to come out of the man. Once again, people were all amazed. This Jesus has the authority to command unclean spirits!

Luther seminary professor David Lose noted that the word “authority” could equally well be translated as “power” here. Jesus has the power to expound on the scriptures on his own, and the power to command even the unclean spirits.

“What have you to do with us? Have you come to destroy us” is the question we all must answer as we read Mark’s gospel Why do you think he is here? What does his arrival mean for you? Do you believe his interpretation of the Bible? Do you believe he can cast out unclean spirits in your life and in the world?

There are so many unclean spirit in our world today. Fear, anger, hatred, violence. Greed, jealousy, the pursuit of our own desires regardless of how that pursuit impacts others. All of our troubles can be traced back to these, from the wars in Gaza, Ukraine, Africa, and Central and South America to climate change, economic disparities, political divisions, crime and scandals of all sorts. How we need Jesus to step in and cast out all these unclean spirits! What a relief it would be if he stepped in and cast all those things out.

There were plenty of people in Jesus’ day longing for just that. Longing for a Messiah who in one fell swoop would right the wrongs of the world, bringing peace and prosperity and justice to all in the blink of an eye. A Messiah who would wave a magic wand and fix everything. Right now.

That is not the Messiah that Mark gives us. It is not the Messiah God gives us. Jesus turns out to be a Messiah who walks alongside us, who carries our burdens with us, who speaks truth to the powers that be but intervenes in people’s lives one at a time instead of overthrowing governments; who is nailed to a cross and dies because he didn’t fulfill everyone’s wishful thinking.

He is a Messiah with the authority to speak directly about God’s love and forgiveness and inclusion of everyone, a Messiah who crosses human made boundaries to carry that message to all, a Messiah with the power to cast out unclean spirits in our lives and in our world but who refuses to force himself on us, and refuses to fulfill our wishful thinking by taking away every challenge when we are called to deal with them in order to learn and grow.

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