

Fourth Sunday after Epiphany January 28 2024

Mark 1:21-28

Jesus has been given his identity as God's Son through the waters of baptism. He has pondered in the wilderness for 40 days what that means. Tempted, perhaps, to use that identity in a way that Caesar did- for political power and might. Having set all that aside, Jesus goes home to Galilee and proclaims that the reign of God has come home to people in him. The response to this good news- repent. Change your thinking and change your actions. Live as if that reign had come.

He called his first disciples- Simon and Andrew, James and John. And now they are in Capernaum a fishing town of about 1500 on the Sea of Galilee. While there, Jesus goes into the synagogue and teaches, something other traveling rabbis would do. But his teaching is different. It hits home with an authority unlike those rabbis and scholars. And in his encounter with the man with the unclean spirit, Jesus shows what it means that in him the reign of God has come into the world. He shows what the power of that reign is.

Jesus will be asked later why he eats with sinners and tax collectors. Those who are not righteous. Who are not holy. Jesus smiles and says that those who are well have no need of a physician. But the sick? Those who because of their sin or illness are outside of community? Those he has come for. To restore them into relationship with the community. As one author put it, the gospel of Jesus is that nothing gets in the way of our being in relationship with God or with each other. Not even unclean spirits.

Jesus comes to bring the reign of God close- and apparently that reign needs to come into even the synagogue. The place of worship of God, study of God's word. For even there is one who has an unclean spirit. A good Lutheran recognition that even in this place, even among those who sit to hear God's word, we have unclean (mixed) spirits. An apt description of Saint and Sinner. The recognition that none of us is perfectly clean, holy, righteous. That all of us are sick- have within us mixed spirits. That need to be cast out.

But what does that look like for us?

Our hymn of the day today makes a good start at describing this reality and also how to deal with it. First, we have to name those unclean spirit. Naming acknowledges that they exist, but also gives us power over them. To name them places boundaries around them, to see how they work and how we can counter them. Second, we pray. As theologian Osvaldo Vena puts is, "Praying is not a pious resignation to God's will, or an exercise that puts our minds at ease, but rather, using Ched Myers' words, that "intensely personal struggle within each disciple, and among us collectively, to resist the despair and distractions that cause us to practice unbelief, to abandon or avoid the way of Jesus." In other words, prayer is the struggle to believe that change can really happen. A better world is possible. It is a cry for Jesus to cast far away from us the unclean spirits that destroy us.

So what does this hymn name and how does it give voice to our prayers.

It names the unclean spirit of dreads that choke our souls- What do we dread today? Are they things like in the Gospel of Matthew where Jesus says- do not worry. Do not let yourself be pulled apart by constantly worrying over what you

will eat or wear. God provides daily bread. Through God's church, through God's people. Is it fear of death, disease, of loss, embarrassment, failure, success? What do you dread? Hear in this story the clear power of Jesus to call to that unclean spirit of dread and cast it out. Pray with the confidence of the father of the epileptic boy- I believe, help my unbelief!

The unclean spirit of hate that stifles joy- Jesus would correct with sometimes cutting directness. But Jesus never hated. God does not hate people. A soul that is captive to hatred towards another who bears the image of God cannot truly feel joy. The root of joy is grace. That magical word that embodies forgiveness, forgetting, acceptance, love. You cannot feel that when you hate- see in someone something other than a human created in the image of God. So we pray, remove from us, Jesus the scourge of hate. Hate for those who don't look like us, have the same political beliefs as us, love the same people as us. Hate for those who commit violence, insult us, despise us. Remove from us, Jesus, that scourge. For you call us to love. That is how people know we are yours- by how we love others. You call us to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us. For hatred only chases away grace and peace. Hatred kills us- slowly but surely. Come and cast out those unclean spirits within us that whisper in our ears to hate- to blame- to look at others as less than... Cast out that unclean spirit and fill us with your love.

The unclean spirit of raging griefs- Grief is healthy, normal. We mourn the loss of a connection, a rootedness. Just as the family and friends of Ric Marlatt grieved yesterday at his funeral. Jesus himself wept for his friend Lazarus. But when grief rages- when it overwhelms- we get lost in a hopelessness that is anathema to

faith. Faithful grief mourns but is comforted by the promise of God in Jesus Christ that death does not win. Raging grief can open us to other unclean spirits; dread and hatred. So we pray, remove from us, O Christ the spirit of uncontrolled grief. Walk with us, we pray, through the dark valley of the shadow of death and loss and give us faith. To trust you and your promise. So that through our tears and loss, we do not lose hope. We know that in you we will be made whole again, we will be joined with those whom we love. Cast out that faithless grief and fill us with your peace.

The unclean spirit of jealous fears- Jealousy means protecting what we believe is ours. We are jealous of our own things we are envious of someone else's. Like so many things each of these unclean spirits is related. We fear loss of privilege and power. We fear loss of place and influence. We are jealous of what we believe is ours. The spirit of jealous fear whispers that there is not enough. That you've earned it and they haven't. It turns us against one another. It makes room for the unclean spirits of hatred and dread. So we pray, remove from us this spirit of jealous fear. Open our minds to see that what we have is not ours, but yours, O God. Given to us not to own, but to steward for a time. Open our minds to know that you provide daily bread.

All these unclean spirits shackle our hearts. Bind them in ways that we cannot loosen without the grace and power of Jesus. These unclean spirits run counter to the reign of God. For they turn us, one on another. They cause us to doubt the God who spun this world into motion and called creation good. They tell us that we can know what is good and bad. That we can discern what is best for us.

We pray to the Jesus who can cast out these spirits. Whose word that we gather to hear today can name and bind them. Oh, that we and the whole world would gather around the door of this place. Would clamor to hear this life giving word even as those in Capernaum did.

We trust that the word of Jesus breathes new life, health, and hope into us. Just as the breath of God animated Adam. As the breath of the Holy Spirit blew through the early church until they were filled to overflowing with the good news of God in Jesus Christ. And they shared that good news with others with wild abandon. And that Spirit moved through those believers to cast out other people's demons.

We sit here today much like those members of the synagogue in Capernaum sat and listened to Jesus. A people who are faithful, but who also have unclean spirits within us. Even in this place, where we meet God in Jesus and receive his Body and Blood in this Meal.

Let us boldly name those unclean spirits within us. This admixture that covers over who God has called us to be. Let us boldly pray to Jesus, come to this Meal, dip in these waters- that these spirits might be cast far from us.

Then let us, like those gathered that day in Capernaum, go into the world and share the amazing news of one who speaks with authority. Who loves without discrimination. Who has come that all might live in the reign of God.