

In my sermon today, I hope to accomplish several things, first, explaining the purpose of Mark's interesting introduction of Jesus and secondly, how it is applicable to our lives during this season of epiphany. In today's society we are used to people making a big splash on to the social scene. The louder our entrance some think the better. We all at some point seek a "red carpet" introduction. One that says, "hey look at me!" So, is it any surprise that on Jesus' initial day of ministry as described in the gospel of Mark, Jesus would have a hype man, John the Baptist, proclaiming his coming? Well, yes, it is a surprise because Jesus was anything but flamboyant. And although John the Baptist appeared to be his hype man, he was only proclaiming the truth because he didn't want anyone getting the wrong impression of who he was. But our gospeler Mark felt compelled to bring life to his retelling of the life of Jesus in quick short fashion. He had no need for embellishment. So, he tells the story as if everything happened quickly, like the next day or even the same day. For example, after Jesus is baptized it appears he then would be tested by Satan, be ready to fulfill his ministry, gather his disciples, immediately go straight to the temple to teach which was customary for the Jewish leaders, but the way he would teach, with great authority, wasn't expected. You get the picture, everything was immediately according to Mark. (Incidentally, the word immediate or immediately appears 39

times in the gospel of Mark.) And just when you think that could have been enough for Jesus to slowdown, bam, Jesus first miracle as recorded by Mark occurs, an exorcism. Now I know some instantly think of a head turning completely around and the spewing of green pea soup everywhere, but this was not that type. The unclean spirit, acknowledges Jesus for who he is, and the power of Jesus' word is revealed. So, to begin from a scholarly understanding, one of the purposes of Mark's Gospel just may have actually been to present Peter's account of the life and sayings of Jesus as an instructional tool for early church practice. Another reason why Mark would have constructed his Gospel may have been to encourage the Christians in Rome who would have been under persecution instigated by Caesar Nero. Nevertheless, his creative introduction of quoting Isaiah works and allows us to make sense of the passage in today's gospel. From an unclean spirit we receive confirmation of John the Baptist's claim of who Jesus really is although Jesus wants to keep it a secret. Mark appears to be a writer who delves deeply in the dramatic approach.

While reading the gospel of Mark you might begin to think Mark has some background knowledge in being competitive because he is constantly presenting challenges faced by Jesus with Jewish religious leaders. He consistently has them battling and taking verbal swipes at each other. In the encounter in the synagogue

at Capernaum Mark has him going against the scribes, who were experts in interpreting the Law, and then instead of allowing Jesus' awesome teaching to be enough to win the battle, he tells the story of an exorcism to demonstrate the authority of Jesus' word. During Jesus' time, exorcism stories generally included an encounter between the afflicted person and the exorcist, the action taken by the exorcist and the demons departure. All of the elements exist in Mark's account of the exorcism. Demons typically take over the personality of their victim in such stories and attempt to resist the exorcist's efforts to expel them. In Mark's crafty and creative account however, readers learn that Jesus has such authority demons instantly obey him. In this lies the most important reason for the gospel of Mark: to show the authority of Jesus. The demons in Mark's gospel prove to be more perceptive theologically than the human audience. They acknowledge Jesus' status as "Holy One of God" and the fact that this coming marks the end of their own domination over human beings. The miracle stories are an integral part of the Gospel narrative, as in the Gospel of Mark, where nearly half of Mark's account of the public ministry of Jesus (Chapters 1-10) describes miracles. Although the ministry of Jesus is centered on the establishment of God's imminent Kingdom, which ended the dominion of the evil one over the world, present ever since sin and death entered mankind. The

miracles were Jesus' chief weapon in the struggle with evil according to Mark (Mark 3:22-27), the most direct being the exorcism of demons, which defeated the power of evil and liberated humanity. The end of demonic power was a sign that the present evil age was coming to an end. But there was a problem because the crowd saw Jesus as a powerful miracle worker, but they did not recognize he was the son of God. The acknowledgement by the unclean spirit shows what was first stated about evil: "now the serpent was more crafty than..." we know where this comes from Gen 3:1 so it is not a coincidence that the unclean spirit knows Jesus.

Satan's power is being broken up because the Lord has come to redeem the people. Therefore, the exorcism indicates what it means for the kingdom of God to draw near. The kingdom cannot be separated from the person of Jesus, who embodies God's power. The unclean spirit is the antithesis of the Holy Spirit, who Jesus possesses. When attempting to resist the exorcist, the demon speaks for the entire kingdom of evil spirits by using the plural, "Have you come to destroy us?" I could hear Jesus answering, "Why yes, I have, and that is very astute of you so please leave now." The swift, violent reaction of the demons proves the truth that Jesus is the Holy One of God. The demons provide insight into Jesus' identity for readers of the gospel but not for characters within the story. Although the crowd

is amazed with Jesus' powers, it does not mean they believe in him. Jesus understood this and was aware of the danger performing an exorcism posed. He did not want a reputation as an exorcist and thus he commanded the demon to be silent. Fast forwarding into modern times, Jesus didn't want to be like the wizard in the Bud Light commercial, only known for creating Bud Light. (Explain the commercial) Mark was not interested in making exorcisms the focal point of the gospel but rather, the focus of the story throughout the gospel remains the divine authority of exercised by Jesus. Moving forward, you might ask: so how does this connect to us during the Epiphany season?

Epiphany is not just about longing for and acknowledging past manifestations of Jesus' greatness and the gospel's power; it's also about discovering what deserves our amazement in our current and longed-for experiences. What deserves us to say "Dilly Dilly".

We're such funny people. Deep down we long for intimacy and authenticity but the last thing we want is to be found out, to have someone see us for who we truly are and who we are not. So, we put on a good front hoping that will gain us approval, acceptance, love.

We say the right things, act the right way, dress and behave the right way, even believe the right way, and all the while we are creating ourselves in the image and likeness of the unclean spirit. The irony is that those fronts we put up, those personas, keep us from having the very things we think they will gain us; things like intimacy, love, acceptance, healing, forgiveness, and authenticity. The personas offer no possibility for life to flourish and be abundant. Still we hold on to those false voices, voices that collectively ask, "Have you come to destroy us?" That is exactly what Jesus has come for. He has come to destroy. His voice silences our false voices. He casts out all our personas and makes us people with a clean spirit. He has everything to do with us. He stands before us as the mirror image of who we can become. There is no aspect of our life about which he is not concerned. He calls us into our true self, the one made in the image and likeness of God. He calls us back into the beauty and wholeness of our original creation. Today's gospel is as much about calling forth as it is about casting out. They are two sides of the same coin.

The true voice and the true image are always present. That's why the man with an unclean spirit can cry out, "I know who you are, the Holy One of God." He speaks from a deep place of knowing. His recognition of Jesus is at a profound level a

recognition of himself and his own holiness. For every voice that denies that and leaves us crying, "What have you do to with us?" Jesus says, "Shhh. Be quiet. That's not who you are. You are mine and I have everything to do with you." Listen to that voice and you too will be astounded at what can become of your life. The power is within you to do great things. Remembering the apostle Paul who said, you can do all things through Christ who strengthens you. You are more than a conqueror, you are the daughters and sons of the king. Dare to become silent, and hear Jesus calling and inviting us to be what God has made, something good, something special, knowing God has never made anything less.