

## FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

East Moline, Illinois

Pastor Becky Sherwood

**January 31, 2021, The 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Epiphany**

Psalm 111, Mark 1:21-28

### **THE POWER AND AUTHORITY OF JESUS' LOVE**

“Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, and 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.”

But Jesus rebuked him saying, “Be silent, and come out of him!”

And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him. They were amazed and they kept on asking one another, “What is this?”

That may be exactly what you are thinking right now: “What is this?” What do we do with a story of Jesus exorcising unclean spirits at the synagogue in Capernaum?

What do we do with a story that sounds more like the latest horror movie, or sci-fi novel, than a story about the Jesus we know?

How can we even believe this story that seems to be far removed from anything we believe today in the industrialized, computerized, scientific world that surrounds us?

While it would be easy to skip this story and go on to the next, I would like to spend some time with it this story this morning because it actually is for us, as unusual as that seems.

One of the important things to remember when reading any story about Jesus is to find out how the people of Jesus' day experienced what was happening.

So, who were these people in the Capernaum synagogue?

They were people who believed that the world was flat.

They were people who believed that when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was flat and God suspended a rounded dome that was bowl shaped over the earth to keep the water in the oceans from mixing with the waters in the sky, which would have flooded the earth. They believed that God set the sun, moon and stars moving across this great dome. Whenever there was rain or snow, the great dome above the earth was leaking.

They were people who lived in a set time and place in history, almost 2000 years ago.

This is not to say that they were stupid, or unscientific or delusional about what was real. They were people affected by the beliefs of their day, just as we are affected by the commonly held beliefs of our own time and place.

In Jesus day, throughout the Mediterranean world, it was believed that there were spirits who lived alongside human beings. Some were good and others were evil. They believed that these spirits interfered in people's lives. They interfered in good ways, and playful ways, and destructive and evil ways. They did good things in people's lives and they did bad things bringing sickness, death and destruction. People believed that all these spirits were stronger than people.

And they believed that God was stronger than any of the spirits.

So, the people in the synagogue were not surprised by the man with the unclean spirit shouting in worship, they were surprised at the way that Jesus handled it. Because, as Mark writes, Jesus taught and spoke as one who had authority; authority that was different from what their scribes

had.

cf: Pilch, John J., *The Cultural World of Jesus, Sunday by Sunday, Cycle B*, Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1996, pp. 28-30.

The scribes in Jesus' day did more than copy things and take notes. They were the recognized Bible scholars of their day. In our day they would have their doctorate in interpreting and teaching the Torah, the first five books of the Old Testament. Their authority didn't come from who they were, but what they studied, and how long they had studied, and their job title of scribe.

Williamson, Lamar, Jr., *Mark, Interpretation Series*, Louisville: John Knox Press, 1983, p. 50

But this Jesus was different. The people couldn't figure him out. He was the son of carpenter from Nazareth, what was he doing standing up and teaching in the synagogue? He taught with authority, although they clearly knew that he was not a biblical scholar like their scribes.

In a culture that at times was almost like a caste system, Jesus wasn't staying in his assigned lane. He wasn't acting like any carpenter they knew.

He was teaching about the word of God as if he had been studying it for years.

It worried the people. Where did his authority come from, was it from God, or was it from evil? Were they witnessing God's spirit or one of the lesser evil spirits?

In the middle of their confusion about who this Jesus was, the man with the unclean spirit appears in the synagogue.

And the people gathered witness Jesus' authority in a new way.

The unclean, or evil spirit, in the man immediately recognizes Jesus for who he is. He shouts: "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' response to this evil one is immediate:

Jesus rebuked him, saying "Be silent, and come out of him!"

And the people's response to this was also immediate. Mark writes: "They kept asking one another, 'What is this? A new teaching—with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him.'"

In the belief system of the day, spirits were more powerful than people, and God was more powerful than the spirits. And now before their eyes they witnessed two things that broke their belief system:

First, In the presence of Jesus the unclean spirit knew who exactly who Jesus was. The first four disciples Jesus had called & those gathered in the synagogue on the Sabbath were just starting to know Jesus. But at first sight evil recognized the Son of God and said so.

Second, they witnessed that Jesus was so powerful that he could cast that evil away with two words: "Be silent." Evil had no power over Jesus. Evil was easily destroyed by Jesus, a man who seemed like themselves, but a man who could completely silence evil with a word.

So, what do we do with this story? What do we do with spirit realms and possessions and exorcisms in 2021, when it feels like we already have enough on our plates?

First: we don't walk away from the story.

Second: we don't get stuck on how those early Christians perceived the spirit realm.

Third: we focus on who Jesus is, and his authority and power over all that stands against who God is, and who God calls us to be as his disciples.

Because Jesus' authority and power have not changed in 2000 years.

We are naïve if we think this story in Mark is an old relic of a story that has nothing to do with us. Because whatever label we give them, there are “unclean spirits” and voices of evil, who shout so loudly in our world. They shout with the voices of arrogance and pride and abusive power, with the voices meant to produce fear and terror, to control others, with the voices of hatred and division and the evil of racism.

They seek to destroy with the voices of guilt and shame

and the crushing voices of hatred for anyone who is different than us.

And sometimes they use the language of faith to destroy those who are most in need of God’s love.

And Jesus Christ is still the only One who stands before these evil ones and unclean spirits and speaks with the voice of authority. And Jesus says “Yes I have come to destroy you, be silent.”

Jesus says “Be Silent” to all that seeks to destroy love, trust, joy, truth and hope.

Jesus says “Be Silent” to the powers of evil and destruction and shame that seek to tear down, instead of building up.

Jesus says “Be Silent” to all that is not part of God’s good and big love for each and every person.

As I spent time with this story this week, I was reminded of a picture of what Jesus’ power and authority look like in the face of destructive evil. It’s a story I told you 11 years ago, and some stories are meant to be told more than once.

The story was written by Anna Murdock who was part of a preaching e-group I used to belong to. She wrote about her friend Beth, who was a member of her church. She had invited our international e-group to pray for Beth and then told Beth we would be praying.

She then shared Beth’s story with us:

I saw my friend, Beth, last night, the last time before she heads to the village in Liberia. Beth is going to a very small village in Liberia until the end of January. She was the daughter of missionaries to this village and hasn’t returned in 48 years. Her mother and father were murdered (and then burned) there when she was 14, and she has never known whether it was a random act of violence or because they were missionaries. She has always felt it was ~~the latter~~ *because they were missionaries*.

The little church her Dad began during his time in this village is still opened for worship and the pastor now was a child of the church at the time her Dad was there. He has contacted her and told her that he now knows what happened to her mother and father and what group of people killed them. And he also told her that he has seen their gravesites, marked by village-made headstones. He asked if she would like to come “home” to visit with him, to hear what he has heard, and to visit her mother and father’s gravesite. He also has said that there are villagers whom she once loved still alive and wanting to see her once more. Beth wants to have time also to walk around the village alone in her thoughts and prayers and memories.

So that is her reason for going. And she is prepared for whatever might be, knowing that there is great danger in doing this. Beth is a remarkable woman of faith and determination, certainly a living tribute to her mother and father and her God. So, as the time of her leaving is now at hand, I ask once more for prayers for wellness, safety, joy, and peace for Beth.

Midrash, Sat, 15 Jan 2009, “anna murdock” <abmurdo@northstate.net>

Two weeks later the following e-mail came:

Beth is back from her trip to the village in Liberia where her father was a missionary (and her parents were murdered). She was 14 when she last saw this village and these faces. 48 years ago. We were sitting around our table at church tonight and she walks in! She was all smiles. The very first thing that she did and said was this ... Beth pointed at me with a very strong motion and

said, "YOUR FRIENDS, Anna. You said that your friends from all over this world were praying for me. There was not a moment when I didn't know that. NOT ONE MOMENT." She went on to say that there was roadblock after roadblock after roadblock as they tried to make their way to the village. Beth said that what occurred at each roadblock should have put a stop to their continuing. She remembered your prayers and she prayed as well and they were finally, at each roadblock, allowed to continue.

Beth only remembered a few words in the dialect of the village. She had practiced them over and over again. When she stepped foot in the village, she said those few words to those who came to see this strange woman and they began to chatter back. At that moment, the words began to flow from her mouth as if she had never left. She said that she had no clue that they were still in her.

An old man walked toward her in tears. Behind him was another old man, in tears as well. The first one said his name ... then the second one said his. They were men who worked for her mother and father and part of what they did was care for her. They took turns caring for "little Beth". She said that all she could do was fall into their arms and cry with them.

Beth had wanted to go to her parents' gravesite alone but that was not to be. The villagers wanted to take her and there was no amount of protesting that would change their minds. She said that it was much more difficult than she ever imagined it would be. First tears, then sobs, then she fell on the stone slab that had been placed in the ground. The villagers cried as well. Then she stood up and said in their dialect, "Enough tears. Now Sing". She began by singing a childhood song that she remembered. They continued with other songs. An amazing moment.

Beth went to the school that her father had started. It is filled with children! The teacher had taught them John 3:16 in English and so they stood out to greet Beth and then recited the Scriptures. Beth said (in their language), "Now, let me say it with you in your language." And so, she and the children said John 3:16 in their dialect (which absolutely thrilled the children).

All of her meals were cooked over an open fire in a cauldron. The only electricity was via an ancient generator which broke the day before she left. A man who had come with another team repaired it enough to offer 3 hours of electricity before it finally died.

The medical clinic was in horrible shape with very few supplies. This has become Beth's focus. She is planning to find grants to rebuild and stock this clinic. Funny, that is what she does ... search out grants and/or write them. So, she already has the skills, the know-how, etc. She certainly has the love for these people. And that was her prayer before the trip. To discover some way to help these poorest of poor people using her skills.

The first leg of her trip home, she sat beside a priest. In Nigeria, her passport was seized (authorities claiming to not understand that she was "in transit"). The understanding came when she gave them all of the money that she had (and got her passport back). The priest told her that she would never get out of Nigeria if she didn't have money, so he gave her all that he had. By then, she had missed her flight out, so she had to change flights. Another \$700.00 to do that. She had no money. Someone tapped her on the shoulder and, of all things, the man who had repaired the generator was there. He said "stay here and don't say anything." He went out of the room with some airport personnel and came back saying that all was OK. The bill had been paid... by him.<sup>4</sup>

Midrash, Sat, 28 Jan 2009, "anna murdock" <abmurdo@northstate.net>

Evil shouts out: "What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us?" And Jesus answers: "Yes! Be silent!"

Jesus says "Be silent" to all that seeks to destroy love, trust, joy, truth and hope.

Jesus says "Be Silent" to the powers of evil and destruction and shame that seek to tear down, instead of building up.

Jesus says "Be Silent" to all that is not part of God's good and big love for each and every

person.

Then Jesus says Yes!, there will be healing where there was murder and death.

Yes!, the roadblocks will be torn down so people can be united from across the years.

Jesus says Yes!, I will reconnect my people, no matter how far apart they have strayed.

Yes!, I will be with you when you grieve; and life, not death, will have the final word.

Jesus says Yes!, children will gather in schools, medicines will be delivered to clinics,  
and even in the presence of persecution my church will live for 48 years and more.

With the authority of Heaven, Jesus speaks with power into our world and into our lives.

And Jesus says Yes!, with the power of love!