

Sermon Transcript

Deuteronomy 18:15-20 and Mark 1:21-28 | January 28, 2024 | Fourth Sunday After Epiphany | Pastor John Klawiter, preaching

Grace and peace to you my friends in Christ,

I was in the middle of a sermon once when somebody piped up and started to debate what I'd just said.

I can't recall the sermon topic or even the point he brought up, but I remember how unexpected it was.

It caught me off guard.

I couldn't ignore him—in fact, if I would have, he would've kept talking. So, I acknowledged him and basically said, "hang on, I'll get there." Then, I talked to him afterward.

The man apologized for interrupting, but admitted he was so struck in the moment about what was being said that he felt the need to say something. We had a conversation addressing his point. He felt heard and continued to worship here, without interruptions, before moving away.

His unexpected disruption threw me off.

It also affected the congregation members who witnessed it. A few people talked to me after worship and mentioned how it caught them by surprise, too.

This man probably wasn't possessed by a demon, but his voice in church that day did not follow the expected behavior of someone attending church.

When Jesus entered the synagogue in Mark's gospel today, a similar outburst occurred.

It's unexpected—it interrupts people's ability to hear the word of God.

A man is possessed by an unclean spirit and according to Mark, it's the demon that speaks:

“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.” 25 But Jesus rebuked him, saying, “Be quiet and come out of him!” 26 And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him.

This evil spirit wants nothing to do with Jesus. His presence is threatening—through his words, Jesus makes the spirit leave the man and they don't question his authority.

I imagine that this evil spirit had been seen as disruptive. Unwanted. I doubt that this man felt like he was part of the community while possessed—he had lost control.

I must also name the importance of care that must be done regarding this passage. This encounter with Jesus is not about mental illness, depression, anxiety, or developmental delays or disabilities.

I've been on the receiving end of people telling me that they prayed for my child's disability to go away—or to place blame through a theological lens.

Sermon Transcript

That's dangerous and destructive. I'm grateful for solid mentors who reminded me that's not how God works.

That's also not what's happening here in the synagogue. Just because demon possession and evil spirits overtaking a body might not be commonplace for us, not every passage in the Bible has a direct and obvious connection to our lives.

This story, in my opinion, is one of them.

What I can take out of this story is the presence of sin and evil in the world.

It's important to name that.

As Luther Sem professor Matt Skinner says, **“This exorcism does not eliminate evil and oppression; it denies those kinds of forces the authority or power to hold ultimate sway over people’s lives.”**

This is a reminder of our inability to conquer sin on our own. We are filled with temptation, we often know what God wants us to do or say, yet we come up short.

Yet, we have an authority on sin. We have somewhere to turn to when we are so overcome by hopelessness. There is a way forward.

This passage provokes us to stop assuming that “the way things are” must always equal “the way things have to be.” The reign of God promises more, whether the “more” can be realized now or in a far-off future.

We look at the world around us and instead of embracing the gifts God has given us to make a change, we are complacent, silent, and lack motivation to put ourselves in uncomfortable situations.

We don't want difficult or awkward situations to arise—being comfortable and quiet is easier and might feel like the way to go. We hope that problems will just go away on their own. Yet there are times when conflict must be confronted.

Jesus, immediately, confronts the issue.

Adam Grant, the organizational psychologist who wrote **“Think Again” (BOOK)** talks about ways that conflict and evil have been faced head on.

In one anecdote, he talked about a woman from Uganda, **Betty Bigombe (BETTY)**, who so deeply wanted peace in her country that she sought out Joseph Kony's army and insisted that she wasn't there to lecture them, but to listen to them.

She invited people to share their problems and empowered his people to generate their own solutions. They nicknamed her “Mother” which was ironic because they treated her like an elder, despite the fact she was there on behalf of the government which was seen as the oppressor to the movement.

Sermon Transcript

Soon, she was invited to talk to commanders in Joseph Kony's (**KONY**) guerilla army. As she put it, "even the devil appreciates being listened to."

She wasn't listening to let Kony continue to dominate and destroy. Her goal, ultimately, was to get him to negotiate peace.

Kony is a fugitive at large and his movement has lost power and it's threat. It's incredible how one woman's courage helped diffuse the momentum of a horrible group willing to commit atrocities for the sake of what they deemed right.

It was a group filled with evil, yet Betty found humanity by asking the members their deepest needs. She sought out the stories. She listened.

Listening is a way of offering others our scarcest, most precious gift: our attention.

Grant believes that when we demonstrate that we care about others and listen to them, they'll be more willing to listen to us.

When we read the Bible, are we ever surprised by what's going on? Are we giving our faith enough attention?

Do we ever listen to the Bible and come away with a feeling that we have found out something we didn't know—about ourselves, about God, about the world?

This story is so short, but when we stop and listen, we see the importance of the ministry of Jesus.

It's immediate—it's time to go. Yet, it's also quite personal. The way that Jesus sees people—and knows them—this fills me with a sense of wonder.

If Jesus sees the people that **we** might be so willing to walk by and overlook, maybe we're missing something.

I have two thoughts for us to takeaway this week:

- 1) **What evil or darkness might we be ignoring that needs to be confronted?** What places can we bring our voice to say—no, that behavior, that sin, doesn't belong here? We have the power of Jesus to call that out.
- 2) **And second, how can we step back? Can we focus deeper on intentional listening?** What could we learn that we have not focused on? Where is Christ encouraging us to deeper connection with others?

Could these two challenges be related?

When Jesus confronts evil, the people are amazed. They see that he is teaching with authority.

They also witness that he sees them—he is dwelling among them.

We dwell amongst others—may the call of Christ compel us to care for each other with words of truth when necessary, grace when difficult, and love at all times.



Sermon Transcript

Thanks for listening. Amen.