

Epiphany 4 (B)
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Text: Mark 1:21-28

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I grew up in a setting that reinforced, at every turn, a very traditional Christian view of the world. In my family, in my church, in my Christian elementary school, I encountered the same beliefs—God and Jesus, heaven and hell, sin and redemption. Angels and demons weren't a significant part of the picture, but they were there too. Everyone who was part of my world seemed to share the same beliefs and values and assumptions, so there wasn't any reason to question anything.

That began to change in high school. I definitely became aware of people with different beliefs. I also began reading things that stretched or challenged my view of the world. I can still remember the unsettling, disorienting kind of feeling I had as I read my way through a book about the Salem witch trials. The author described how witnesses claimed to see unbelievable things—witches flying through the air and demons attacking people, even in church. The whole community was caught up in mass hysteria. The people's gullibility was shocking, and the consequences were terrible. 19 people were executed as witches. In the years that followed, witnesses recanted their testimony, and church leaders apologized for their role in fostering the terror. People acknowledged that the trials were a tragedy, but it couldn't bring back any of those put to death. It made me think very seriously about what I believed, and what I didn't, and why, based on what evidence. I'd say that the proper relationship of faith and reason and experience has played a significant role in my wrestling and struggling with Christian faith ever since.

I wonder if you've experienced anything like that as you've moved from childhood faith to adult faith. It's a live issue in our gospel story for today. I wonder what came to mind for you as you listened, as the story described the unclean spirit crying out to Jesus, "What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us?" Then Jesus rebuked the spirit and it convulsed the man and came out of him. I wonder—did you imagine something like in the movie, "The Exorcist"? Or did it sort of float by—just one of those strange things out of the Bible. Or maybe you felt... confused? I think all of those reactions are perfectly normal, because this really is a strange and challenging story. It certainly isn't like anything in my experience—and I imagine it's unlike anything you've ever experienced either. What I'd like to do this morning is explore what the Bible says about "demons" and "unclean spirits," because I believe there are a couple of important things we can learn from the ancient world, and from Jesus' practice, around this topic.

In the first century, pretty much everyone believed that demons, or unclean spirits, were a primary cause of physical and mental suffering. Stories in the Bible about demon possession seem to picture individuals in some kind of a crisis—sometimes with physical symptoms, sometimes with mental or emotional symptoms. People were behaving erratically, or shouting out, or having something like an epileptic seizure. It sounds similar to things we can witness on the streets of downtown Portland any day of the week. I think it is okay to recognize that in the

ancient, pre-scientific world of the Bible, people attributed to demons things that we would name with a medical diagnosis, like epilepsy, or a psychiatric diagnosis, like schizophrenia. But here's what I think is important to notice. In the ancient world, people tended to react to disturbing behavior in the same way people often do now—avoiding the person with the behavior, or ignoring them, or completely shunning them. But Jesus didn't. In story after story, Jesus wasn't afraid of people with some deviant behavior. He saw them all as loved by God and belonging to God's people. How much healing power is carried in that attitude! I believe that for us, not just as individuals but as a society, the first important thing we have to learn from Jesus is to look with compassion on our neighbors who are in crisis.

The second thing we can learn from the ancient world is a little more complicated. People in Jesus' time spoke of God's Holy Spirit, or demonic unclean spirits, to name things that they experienced that had a powerful effect on people's lives. Even though that ancient way of speaking is pre-scientific and imprecise, it still offers a way to imagine how we are connected to each other in ways we can't even see, how a transpersonal or spiritual reality can exist between us and among us, and can exert power over us. We have a remnant of that spiritual language—for example, we can identify "team spirit" as the reason a team of good-enough basketball players, playing in front of their home crowd, is able to beat a group of All Star players. It's not that we think the "team spirit" is a spiritual being—instead, team spirit is a powerful, invisible force between and among the team members and their fans that allows them to not just anticipate each other's moves, but to play above anything we might imagine they were capable of. That's the positive side of spiritual powers.

There's also an ugly side to this spiritual reality. I think of how Al Anon describes the power of addiction. It not only controls the addict's behavior, but infects their whole family system. It twists and distorts all of their relationships. Addiction is more than an individually destructive force. It also hijacks the love and support of friends and family members, attempting to make them serve the addiction. The addiction has transpersonal power—and in Jesus' time, people probably would have said the addict was possessed by an unclean spirit. Or think of how people are beginning to become aware of how systemic racism complicates law enforcement—it's not just that there are a few bad apples. There's a whole web of laws and policies and attitudes and expectations and history that work together to put police officers and people of color in impossibly difficult and dangerous situations. There is a transpersonal quality to the reality of racism. And perhaps in this year of raging conspiracy theories and alternative facts, we are able to recognize something of the reality that the language of unclean spirits attempts to name. After the disturbing events we've seen across our nation this month, categories, like "mass hysteria" or "mob mentality," don't seem adequate to describe the invasive, malignant, overpowering character of evil that is much larger than any individual person, something that does indeed "possess" people and drive them to act for "its" purposes. People in the ancient world would have probably said it was an unclean spirit.

And that brings us back to our gospel story, about Jesus casting out the unclean spirit. Our gospel writer, Mark, emphasizes that Jesus is able to do this because of his authority. That authority came from how Jesus embodied the love of God and the truth of God and the justice

of God. Jesus acted from knowing that every person is loved by God—no matter how twisted they may be. Jesus spoke and acted for God, who doesn't want anyone to be controlled by powers that diminish their lives. That authority is something we, in our own way, can claim as well. We know that every person is valued by their creator. This gives us clarity in how we deal with the possessed. First of all, we don't demonize them. Instead, we meet them with love, and truth and justice. That means not papering over evil, but requiring accountability. It also means not rejecting anyone as an abomination, but calling them to live up to their identity as ones beloved by God.

Embodying Jesus' way of compassion, forgiveness and justice is the reign of God arriving, just like Jesus announced. We experience it now and not yet, powerfully present but also only partially present. We have a crucial role to play in the presence of God's reign—combatting systemic racism, political polarization, or the degradation of God's creation. All of these are expressions of the unclean spirit of our age. This unclean spirit is always focused on me and now. It knows nothing of the needs of neighbors, of caring for others. It knows nothing of enough, or of a common good. It is fearful and resentful, angry and prone to violence. It is suspicious of anyone or anything different. And with the authority of Jesus, we reject it and call ourselves and our neighbors to live together as God's people, and live out our true vocation as God's children—because in that kind of life there is freedom, and community, and blessing, and wholeness, and joy. Thanks be to God. Amen.