

Sermon for February 1, 201

Let's be honest; when first reading this story from Mark its easy to dismiss it as not being very relevant to our lives today. I mean demons and evil spirits possessing us? That's only in Hollywood movies, right! In fact the only experience I have with evil spirits outside of the Bible was when I read the Exorcist many years ago.

But this story about demon possession is very important to Mark; so important that it's the first miracle story in Mark. In any narrative "firsts" are very important and they aren't put first by accident. One thing Mark may be trying to tell us is just what Jesus was talking about in his first very short sermon—"The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news." These first stories in Mark show us just what the kingdom of God looks like and our first story is about an exorcism.

But it's more than just that. Before Jesus began his ministry he was baptized by John and filled with the Holy Spirit. He heard God the Father proclaim to him, "You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased." Now we see a man who is possessed by an unclean spirit, a spirit that most likely isn't telling this man that he is beloved or pleasing to God in any way. It would be to our advantage to keep the Hollywood descriptions of demons out of our minds and think of them as the forces that oppose God's will for us. Instead of blessing us; they curse us. Instead of helping us to love one another; they turn us to hate. Instead of bringing us together; they try to split us apart.

As Jesus begins his ministry he has been baptized, blessed, and filled with the Holy Spirit. He has been tempted by the ruler of all demons in the desert and now he comes to show everyone what the kingdom of heaven on earth can look like. And his first way of doing this—he fights the forces of evil that would take away from the sons and daughters of God all that God hopes and plans for us.

If we look at demons as those forces that try to separate us from God instead of beings that spin our heads around and float us in the air; we can see that we've had more experience with them than we would like to believe. At least I know I have. When I get so possessed by anger that I say and do things that I regret later; when I get so possessed by envy and jealousy that I spend my money on things that I don't really want or need, but get things just to keep up appearances with others; then I've experienced those forces that keep me from what God wants for me.

All of us here today are possessed by something. It may be things that our society deems to be bad, such as alcohol, drugs, tobacco, or gambling. Or it could be things that our society deems to be good traits such as being a workaholic, or having the affluenza bug, or greed; remember the line from the movie *Wall Street*—"Greed is good."

Jesus is still present today cleansing us from whatever unclean spirit has possession of us. Sometimes it's just as dramatic as the story told here. I've been told stories and have seen people who have said that this was the last drop of liquor they were going to drink or the last cigarette they were going to smoke, or the last time they were going to gamble and with God's grace and mercy they

have been able to overcome it. But sometimes the path to wholeness takes time and company. Sometimes we need the prayer chains, the AA meetings, the anger management classes or the gamblers anonymous meetings to rid us of our demons.

Whatever means we use to rid ourselves of the unclean spirits who try to possess us; God is there working through them to free us from the powers that want to steal from us all that God hopes and intends for our lives. It was believed that if you could name something you had power over it. Our journey towards wholeness begins today by naming what possesses us. Please take the piece of paper you were given and write on it one or two words naming the thing that is trying to possess you. Do not sign your name—God will know who it's from and then either put it in the offering plate and I will burn them or take them home and burn them yourselves; either way we will be letting them go and releasing them to God.