

Title: The Boundary-Crossing God
Text: Mark 1: 21 – 28
Date: January 28, 2018

As we began our journey through Mark last week we took some time to reflect on Mark's use of the term "**the Kingdom of God,**" and we highlighted that the term is framed – overtly or subtlety – in distinction to the kingdoms of this world. I said that, "The Kingdom of God represents a kind of intrusion in the world, and the world is going to resist this intrusion. As you can see, the stage is set for conflict."

If you look at the four gospels you can learn a lot about the author's Christology – that is, what they think about the Christ – by the stories they begin with. Mark begins his gospel with this story that highlights the clash of these kingdoms. We need to look at this story not just as the spectacle of an exorcism, but as a battle between kingdoms. It is the conflict between the power of evil, associated with Satan (Beelzebul, Mk. 3:22) and demons, and the power of God exercised through Jesus.

Now I have to acknowledge that there are challenges for a modern preacher talking about demon possessed people, and all the Hollywood images that are associated with it. So without being distracted by probing the cultural context of this in depth, I would ask that we keep our eye on the high view here. Maybe some other day we can have a seminar on exorcisms.

I would draw your attention to the fact that three times there is reference to "**unclean spirits**" in this passage. We do know a lot about purity codes in those days, and all that is implied about being ritually clean and unclean. With that in mind, the normal response at that time to anything or anyone unclean would be to give them a wide berth. Stay clear of having any contact with them.

Jesus, however, does not follow that cultural norm. He crosses that boundary between clean and unclean, and engages the unclean spirits. I think that image by itself is worth the price of admission: God crossing boundaries to rescue us.

OK then. If this is the high view of the story, let me give you a couple of angles on this that capture my attention.

While it makes a better movie to focus on Jesus battling demons, there is a character in this story that I feel is sadly overlooked. The man with the demons, referred to simply as "the man." We really know nothing about him. We know nothing about his parents. We don't know where he went to high school. We don't know how long he has been struggling with demons. We don't know how he contracted a case of the demons in the first place. Was it something he ate? Did he play with Ouija boards as a child?

The story is lifted up as Jesus battling demons (and winning, of course.) Putting a slightly different spin on it, I rather like the notion of fighting a cosmic battle for the life and body of some average guy we know nothing about. Instead of focusing on battling demons, how about focusing on going to battle over the body and life of some average dude we know nothing about.

Stay with me now, but see if you can follow the connections I am making in my mind. Last year I read "**Between the World and Me**" by Ta-Nehisi Coates – almost an autobiographical version of the history of race and racism in America. I can't give you a specific citation, but I was struck by how the book kept referring to the black body, and how one should live within the black

body. It caught my attention because that is not normally how I think. He articulates a fight for his body. He shows how racism operates through the control, manipulation, and exploitation of black bodies and the resulting fragility of black bodies within a racist society. Coates traces this fragility back to the way black bodies/black people were turned into objects with a monetary value during colonialism and slavery.

Despite what you may or may not think of demons, I see the connection of demonic forces conspiring to take control of a body. This is nothing that anyone would ask for. There are forces beyond ourselves that would take control of our bodies, and are not waiting for an invitation to do so.

What can stand against such forces? Our gospel lesson begins with the observation that **“They were astounded at [Jesus’] teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes.”** (1:22) After that observation is the incidence of Jesus driving out the unclean spirits, and *again* we have the commentary: **“What is this? A new teaching—with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him.”** (v. 27) Jesus taught as one having authority. His very presence conveyed authority . . . not as the scribes.

We sure could use a voice of authority today when confronting the demonic forces of our day. More than *projecting* authority (the way that William F. Buckley did with his use of tonality and big words), we need to sense moral authority, the way we did with Martin Luther King, Jr. Where are the voices that speak with authority today?

One such remarkable voice that confronts demonic forces today is Rev. William Barber, a pastor from North Carolina. And speaking of clashing kingdoms, he says, **“Caesar may be dead, but the spirit of Caesar is still alive because oppression still lives and hate still lives and racism still lives and meanness still lives and injustice still lives.”** You can see it, he says, **“when [politicians] deny the God-given humanity and the human rights of individuals and then stack the courts to protect themselves and their power and then put pornographic sums of money into the political structure in order to dominate it. I can tell you, Caesar still lives.”**

Barber built the Moral Mondays movement in North Carolina, a racially diverse coalition of believers and nonbelievers that every Monday brought a specific moral issue to the steps of the North Carolina state capitol building. He is credited with helping to dethrone the governor and disband a conservative supermajority responsible for some of the state’s most regressive legislation in decades. He speaks with unmistakable moral authority.

Where does that authority come from? Thinking of our portrayal of Jesus in Mark, it all began with his baptism. We read that **“as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”** (1:10-11)

In our story today, we then have one man filled with demons, and another man filled with the Spirit. We have one man being torn apart from within, and another man profoundly clear on his identity as a child of God. So then if we are going to be equipped to speak with authority to the demonic forces of our time, we need to be filled with the Spirit. We need to know who we are. We need to know whose we are.

This is a growth opportunity for all of us I suspect. I fail to speak with the gravitas of Rev. Barber, but I have more of a Voice than I used to. It may be impossible for you to measure the fullness of the spirit within you, but those around you will be best positioned to sense it. People around you can sense if you are grasping for power, or speaking the truth in love. People

around you can sense if you are striving to belittle others with the force of your intellect, or lift us all up to a higher vision.

You could dispassionately say, "Isn't great to live in a land where every vote counts!" Or, full of the Holy Spirit, you could passionately say like Rev. Barber, **"When you attack voting rights and then use that power gained by that, to attack living wages, then you attack health care and hurt millions of people . . . it's probably one of the most immoral things I've ever seen."**

We are fighting for bodies that never asked to be "possessed" in the first place. As Ta-Nehisi Coates says, **"All our phrasing—race relations, racial chasm, racial justice, racial profiling, white privilege, even white supremacy—serves to obscure that racism is a visceral experience, that it dislodges brains, blocks airways, rips muscle, extracts organs, cracks bones, breaks teeth. You must never look away from this. You must always remember that the sociology, the history, the economics, the graphs, the charts, the regressions all land, with great violence, upon the body."**

If we want to cross boundaries the way God does – if we want to save nameless bodies - we need to find our voice, both as individuals, and as a church. It is wonderful to be known as "a house of prayer." It is wonderful to be known as "a school of love." Wouldn't it also be wonderful to be known as a community that confronts the demonic forces of our day with moral authority. Wouldn't it be wonderful if people in the Panhandle **"were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, "What is this? A new teaching—with authority!"** (v. 27

Amen.

Mark 1: 21 – 28

²¹They went to Capernaum; and when the sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught.

²²They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes. ²³Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, ²⁴and 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." ²⁵But Jesus rebuked him, saying, "Be silent, and come out of him!" ²⁶And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him.

²⁷They were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, "What is this? A new teaching—with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him." ²⁸At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.