

Mark 1:21-28  
January 31, 2021

Grace and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ! Amen.

A young pastor sits alone in his car engulfed in fear, tears running down his face, pleading with God not to send him into that hospital room where a young couple sits holding their lifeless stillborn child. A woman ducks into a dressing room rather than encounter a life-long friend who has now become her enemy over a dispute several years ago. Where once was love and compassion has now been replaced with anger, bitterness, and hate. A family gathers around a loved one overcome and possessed by the addiction of drugs. His addiction has led him down a road that has caused him to lose his job, his marriage, his children, and most all he has. A young business executive is so overcome by the spirit of making more money, buying more stuff, having more control that she casts aside ethics and morals in lieu of doing anything and everything in order to appease the spirit of greed inside of her.

Narrative stories about Jesus exercising demons and unclean spirits may seem troublesome for us living so many years after his death and resurrection. Almost immediately upon hearing this our minds might conjure up cinematic visions of a child floating above her mattress, her head is spinning in all directions uttering words with a monster-like voice.

Today Mark gives another voice who confirms Jesus' identity. Recall that after His baptism by John the heavens were torn apart, God's Spirit descended upon him and a voice from heaven said, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." Later in Mark, it will be Peter's voice that confesses, "You are the Christ!" At the foot of the cross it will be the voice of the centurion, "Truly this man was the Son of God." But today that voice comes from an unclean spirit saying, "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."

Like last week, Mark leaves us pondering as he withholds details such as who was this man, where did he come from, or what was it that made him unclean; however, he does not leave us guessing on who Jesus is and the authority he has been given by God to teach and do the impossible. However, we may seek to define or imagine this unclean spirit, for the sake of Mark's gospel, it is seen as acting contrary to God's will. It is a demonic force of which Jesus has come to dismantle in the ongoing struggle of God against the powers of evil in the world. Whatever it is that ailed this man and possessed him also knows it is no match for Jesus. It cries out in fear aware Jesus can destroy it and free the man of this spirit that deems him unclean.

For the most part, voices in our culture do not speak of spirits or demons or even unclean for that matter. We may label them as something different. Yet, we know they are there. They may come from within or outside of us and they continue their assault on every aspect of our well-being.

In our baptism and when we affirm our baptism, also known as confirmation, we profess our faith by answering three questions.

1. Do you renounce the devil and all the forces that defy God?
2. Do you renounce the powers of this world that rebel against God?
3. Do you renounce the ways of sin that draw you from God?

To each, our response is, "I renounce them." We affirm and acknowledge there are so many things beyond our control that continually seek to turn us inward upon ourselves. To attempt to lay claim to our lives and separate us from God. To resist God's will. To cast aside the light of Christ that shines in each of us.

Some forces that run counter to God's will and God's reign are thrust upon those created in the image of God due to their gender, sexual orientation, the color of their skin or via systems and structures that continually oppress, enslave, impoverish, and place value on some lives more than others.

There are also those forces that by the freewill God granted to us, have a voice to fend off with the help of God. As people of faith, we affirm in our baptism we do not have to do this alone; nor can we. The final words each candidate speaks as they affirm to live out their faith are, “I do, and *I ask God to help and guide me.*” We do not go it alone. As the voices of Mark remind us, “The beloved Son of God, the Christ, the Holy One of God” goes with us. With his help, we can choose to say “no” to hatred. We can choose to say “no” to white supremacy. We can choose to say “no” to xenophobia. We can choose, and it is part and parcel to God’s character and our calling as God’s people, to speak out against systems, structures, and laws that lead to marginalization and the devaluation of one human being over another human being. We can choose “love” because as 1 John reminds us, “God loved us first.” (1 John 4:19). We can make a difference. One small act of love, compassion, gentleness, encouragement, forgiveness, reconciliation, listening to another’s story, empathy for another, and openness to grow and learn. With the help of the One who has the authority to silence the voices that defy God and cast a cloud over the beautiful, magnificent and glorious kingdom that is God’s, we have been entrusted with the gifts and fruit of the Spirit to let the perpetual light of Christ shine in this world that God so loves.

We can; however, the Apostle Paul also reminds us of the power of sin that holds power over our lives as he states in Romans, “For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.” Sin continues to “possess” us, hold us in bondage, and speak voices to us that are counter to God’s will. We know all too often the resistance we put up when that which is unclean and sinful in our lives recognizes that Jesus is coming too close for comfort. We utter the words like the young pastor, “No way Jesus! I am not going in there.” We speak words of contempt, “You want me to speak to her after what she did to me – I don’t think so God. I hate her. I will never forgive her.” Or we speak words of complacency, “Oh, someone else will do it God – it’s not my responsibility.” Or we speak words of fear, “We are just a small congregation – how can we make a difference?”

This is where the words of grace come in. The promise of baptism erupts within us and our hearts overflow through the refreshing waters of life we were washed in. The cross of Calvary gives way to the empty tomb of Easter and the confidence to believe, trust, and claim the Holy One of God has defeated these powers of sin and death. We rise anew with clean hearts through the unending and unconditional love, grace and forgiveness of Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior. As our voices say, “We confess that we are captive to sin and cannot free ourselves.” It is the Spirit of God that reaches into the cracks and crevices of hardness of heart and smooths and softens them with words that give voice to this blessed assurance:

God, who is rich in mercy, loved us even when we were dead in sin, and made us alive together with Christ. By grace you have been saved. In the name of + Jesus Christ, your sins are forgiven. Almighty God strengthen you with power through the Holy Spirit, that Christ may live in your hearts through faith.<sup>i</sup>

They are words of God. God’s voice permeates every single word, syllable, and letter. The authority of Jesus’ voice continues to speak to us. This is the voice we are called to follow and listen to. It is the voice, which can drive out those spirits that engulf us. The voice we turn to amidst all the other competing voices in our lives. His is the voice that states, “Be silent, and come out of him.” His is the voice that states, “And remember, I am with you always until the end of the age.” Listen for his voice – his voice is the voice of love, compassion, forgiveness, and salvation. It is the voice that states, “You are loved. You are precious. You are mine.”

---

<sup>i</sup> *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*; © 2006 Evangelical Lutheran Church in America; “Order of Confession and Forgiveness”, p. 96. Used by permission of Augsburg Fortress under license # SB135727.