

Listen! Come Out!
Sermon 212 | Greystone Baptist Church | January 28, 2024
Mark 1:21-28

This week I asked my Facebook friends a question to help me get started on the sermon for today. “What comes to mind when you hear the phrase *unclean spirits?*”

I wanted to know because in this series we are trying to listen to the Gospel with new ears and I have some experiences and associations with this phrase that I just can’t get out of my own head in order to hear the words anew.

I cannot hear the words *unclean spirits* without immediately drawing to mind a scene from the 2004 film, *Saved*, which featured Mandy Moore playing the role of Hilary Faye , leader of a high school posse of Christian girls seeking to live their best life for Christ - or at least live their best life using words that sound Christian while acting in ways that are completely contradictory to the example of Jesus. Throughout the film, there is a growing conflict between Mandy Moore’s character, Hilary, and a classmate of hers named Mary, played by Jena Malone.

Mary has become pregnant and is feeling isolated and distant from her Christian friends. She’s not comfortable telling them what is going on because of the ways they have treated outsiders and other perceived sinners before. She knows that she wouldn’t be safe if they knew. Noticing the distance, Hilary and the posse decide that an intervention is needed. The posse loads into their van with Hilary behind the wheel as they race down the road where Mary is walking home.

Screeching to a halt near her path, the girls jump out of the van, grab Mary, and wrestle her inside the vehicle. Through the scuffle you can hear pieces of broken up dialogue:

Throw her in here, hurry up, hurry up.

In the name of Jesus Christ, I command you, leave the body of this servant of God.

-You’re performing an exorcism on me?!

*Yes... Mary, we have got to get rid of the evil in you.
It's God's will! (One of the other members of the posse adds in.)
God's will? Mary asks. You don't know anything about God's will.¹*

You see why I needed help? I can't get this scene out of my mind when I read the stories of Jesus exorcizing unclean spirits. (hmmm?) I suppose sometimes we all have songs, films, stories, and experiences that cloud our minds and inform our reading of the text... whether we want to or not.

So anyway, I needed help, and let me just say that Facebook did not disappoint! When I asked what comes to mind when you hear the phrase *unclean spirits*, lots of people had a lot to say about it! Here's a snapshot of some of those comments:

Some named the troublesome history of interpretations that have resulted from a cursory reading. These hasty conclusions associate conditions like epilepsy or mental illness with demon possession, saying, "They didn't know the science back then so they explained what they could not understand with some kind of primitive theology." These modernist interpretations reached a height in the mid-twentieth century and made their way into some of the commentaries. In the last 50 years though, biblical scholars and theologians have moved away from those kinds of interpretations, recognizing that they cause further harm and encourage additional layers of marginalization to a people who are already suffering.

Some remembered hearing in church growing up that *unclean spirits* described anyone who was "lost" or somehow outside the parameters of God's salvific love.

Some called out public figures by name saying, "Surely, they've got a demon!" But I am not sure that really helps either.

(you know...) It's funny how much we like interpretations of scripture that always seem to let us off the hook... readings that strip the text of its power and accountability and meaning for our own lives, only requiring others to change everything.

¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ij0JLKDJOrC>

It's funny how much we like to interpret the text in such a way that always points the finger away from us - when it comes to who is on the wrong side of God's will - and directly at someone else. Maybe funny isn't the right word... maybe we should say that it's *alarming* or *astounding* how often we read scripture this way.

But back to the text at hand. Some said that the phrase "unclean spirit" made them think of intergenerational trauma and the ways our past sometimes holds us captive, preventing freedom and healthy relationships and wholeness in life. Some said that an "unclean spirit" is anything that separates us from God. And some simply named that a good explanation is difficult to pin down.

And it *is* difficult to pin it down! It's why the post elicited comments from other preachers saying:

*What other texts are in the lectionary for this week?
or... simply "following" meaning,
they're paying attention to this thread as they too are looking for
sermon content - something to say about this strange and peculiar text.*

This week as I have returned to this story multiple times, there was a new phrase that seemed to leap off the page. These are words that I have read a million times as I have passed through the first chapter of this Gospel. Words that fade into the background when we are reading just to get a sense of the action. But we are learning with Mark that every word and phrase matters because Mark is not as verbose as the other Gospel writers. Mark is concise and efficient and specific and intentional.

So here's the part that demanded my attention:

Just then there was a man in their synagogue with an unclean spirit.

In the past the latter part of that sentence would get all the focus, but this time it was another phrase... There was a man *in their synagogue*...

Now, Mark has shown us that he can write a quick and abrupt entry. Remember the baptism story? But that isn't here, with this guy.

This is... NOT a man who came stumbling in, visibly overcome with illness or injury. NOT a man who burst through the door with obvious, violent anger toward Jesus and his teachings. NOT a man who even seemed to be a stranger to the scribes at all.

No, this was a man, who was there when Jesus was teaching, *in* their midst, *in* their company, *in* their synagogue (the Gospel says). It seems as if he was there all along, as if he was one of them... Hiding in plain sight (as they say), parading around with the scribes, wearing the proper clothes, acting in the proper ways, and saying all the right things. ... Until he cries out in response to Jesus' teaching:

*What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth?
Have you come to destroy us?*

There's even a hint of fear in those words, can you sense it? *Have you come to destroy us?* [It makes me want to know what Jesus was teaching!]

This is another one of those places in Mark's Gospel where the cosmic and human stories seem to be colliding as Jesus talks with the spirits that occupy the man's body like the alien wearing the Edgar suit (anybody seen *Men in Black* lately?).

Before the conversation can go on too long, Jesus rebukes the man and silences the spirit before commanding it to, "Come out!" Which it did! Throwing the man into loud convulsions. Meanwhile... the congregation was amazed, astounded, unsettled by what they had seen.

Scholars say that the words used to describe the reactions that day connote more than our English translations let on. Our Bibles use words like "amazed, astounded, shocked, etc." and yes, the people were all of those things; but in the ancient languages these words conveyed a kind of "panic," that might be lost on us... panic that was, "associated with the [complete] disruption of the assumed order of things."² This kind of panicked response seems a bit extreme if we're simply witnessing an isolated healing or individual exorcism.

² Ched Myers, *Binding the Strong Man*, 142.

Those kinds of things happened all the time in the ancient world. Healers (of both the spiritual and physical sort) were all over the place doing their work, tending to the bodies of afflicted persons. So the crowds would have been used to that kind of thing; but *this* exorcism elicited something different. Something akin to panic. But *why?* We need to ask.

Perhaps because there's something bigger going on here with this spiritual cleansing. And if we look further into the Gospel of Mark, we will find evidence to support this hypothesis. This will just be the first time Jesus clashes directly with the scribes, it happens again in chapter 3. And each time it happens, Jesus' actions violate the rules of the prevailing social and religious order. There's something about Jesus' ministry that crosses a line and signals *everything must change*. And here, in today's reading from the Gospel of Mark... it all starts *in* the synagogue.

There are so many ways to read and interpret this text. That is always the case with scripture, which makes the tasks of teaching and preaching particularly challenging. Sometimes, like we do with parables, we have to hold up Gospel stories and pay attention to the things that are informing our particular conclusions on particular occasions. Things like our personal experiences, our intellect, reason, and religious and cultural traditions are always at work, collaborating with the Holy Spirit, guiding our reading, and helping us to discern meaning for our lives.

So this time as all of these sources converge and we search for meaning in this ancient story... I am drawn to the words: "There was a man *in their synagogue...*" And I wonder if there are any unclean spirits in our own synagogue of sorts? And when I say "our own synagogue" I am not talking about the places where our Jewish siblings worship. No, that kind of reading would - once again - let us off the hook. *Maybe wonder isn't the right word... feels like we need something stronger... maybe convicted is more adequate.*

This morning, I am convicted about the unclean spirits that have taken up residence in our own house, so to speak. In Christian places of worship and in Christian homes... In Christian organizations and in public rhetoric voiced by people who publicly call themselves Christian. Today, I am convicted about the unclean spirits that cry out from *within* our house in the forms of: sexism and racism, of xenophobia and homophobia, spirits that call for any

form of violence or war. These are some big ones, and they are crying out in big ways these days...

But these are not all the unclean spirits among and within us. There are also so many more that also need to be purged. We have spirits of self-righteousness and self-preservation, of greed and lust. Spirits of bitterness and anger, spirits of mistrust and deceit, spirits that cause us to hold on to grudges when we need to let things go. Spirits of judgment and perfectionism. Spirits that operate like walls keeping us from right relationship with God and one another. Spirits that get in the way of forgiveness, and mercy, and grace, and kindness, and understanding, and hospitality, and inclusion, and belonging...

Yes, there is a whole legion of unclean spirits, parading around looking for permanent residence in this world and friends, I am afraid that we have let them in. Into our homes and into our church. Into our relationships and into our own hearts. And I don't know about you, but I am weary from trying to ignore them, I am tired of pretending they are not here and I think I just might be ready for the Holy Spirit to come and purge me, purge US, of each and every one...

Even if our affinity for them, our comfort with them, our white-knuckled grip on them means that our liberation from them will send us falling to the ground in loud convulsions... I am convicted today that the time has come for Jesus to say: *Silence! Come out!*"

Because the truth is, *until* we are cleansed of all that is unclean within us, we cannot know the *good-ness* of the *good news*.

So where do we start?

First we have to get really honest with ourselves, acknowledging the places where we have allowed *unclean spirits* to live within us. We have to name them to ourselves and to one another. Then we have to confess them to God... and *allow* God to cast them out of us, one by one.

Now this work is neither easy nor fast. Rather, it will take a lifetime of humility, vulnerability, and devotion. But it is critical - if we ever want to *be* the body of Christ in this world.

And if we need some help finding the words to get us started... all we have to do is turn to the Psalms adding our voices to the timeless prayer saying:

*Create in me a clean heart, O God,
and put a new and right spirit within me.
Do not cast me away from your presence,
and do not take your holy spirit from me.
Restore to me the joy of your salvation,
and sustain in me a willing spirit.*

*Create in US a clean heart, O God.
[And whatever it takes - even if it means everything must change]
put a new and right spirit here within us.*

Amen.