

Message for the Fourth Sunday after Epiphany, Year B (1/31/2021)  
Mark 1:21-28

This is a story about first impressions. The exorcism in the synagogue at Capernaum is the very first event of Jesus' ministry in the Gospel of Mark. Already in chapter one, Mark's listeners have been introduced to Jesus through John the Baptizer's prediction of a more powerful one to come, the Spirit's descent to anoint Jesus at his baptism and God's words of loving affirmation, Jesus' struggle with Satan in the wilderness, and his irresistible call to the first disciples. But, for the rest of the people in Mark's story, the scene in our Gospel today is the first glimpse they get into Jesus' identity and purpose.

First impressions matter. I suppose it's possible to overcome a bad first impression, but it takes work. That's because human intuition is powerful, more powerful, in fact, than reason. Although we like to think of ourselves as mostly rational creatures who come to logical conclusions based on facts, in actuality we interpret the world around us largely through natural feeling. Of course, our intuition is not always trustworthy. Prejudice, for instance, has a way of marring our perceptions. Nevertheless, our convictions and fears and hopes are rooted so deeply that they shape how we make sense of our experiences.

Intuition is what's at work in Jesus' first disciples when they leave everything behind to follow him. And, intuition is what's at work in the people who witness the exorcism in the synagogue at Capernaum. "What is this?" they

marvel. "A new teaching – with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him."

The exorcism isn't just a magic trick. Rather, it's a veritable act of liberation; Jesus speaks, and by his word he redeems a life. That's how the people get a sense that he's the real deal. In contrast to conventional teachers, this teacher exercises authority because his proclamation works; it's actually good news for someone. Jesus earns the people's respect by putting his money where his mouth is, so to speak. And "at once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee."

Clearly, Jesus knows how to make a good first impression. And as it turns out, the exorcism is emblematic of the Gospel as a whole, foreshadowing all the ways he'll enact the reign of God in defiance of the reign of evil. **The event in the synagogue is a sign that God's word is efficacious, and that God is at work in Jesus to drive out oppression and suffering and death once and for all.**

Ironically, however, it's also intuition that prevents us from accepting this story at face value. Had we been there to witness the exorcism, maybe we'd be convinced that something special was going on, too. But, our post-Enlightenment worldview has primed us to question supernatural phenomena like demon possession and purely spiritual healing. We're liable to get hung up on the details of Mark's account, framing the story instead in terms of mental illness, for instance, or discarding it altogether as a fairytale.

But, the scriptures aren't meant to be picked apart from our contemporary perspective. Gospel stories about affliction and healing "always mean more than a first-century medical diagnosis," to quote one interpreter.<sup>1</sup> The power of the account in our Gospel today lies not in its ability to speak scientific truth, but to proclaim a more fundamental truth about God's relationship to the world God loves. **It feeds our hope that the power of God, embodied in the person of Jesus and active in the Spirit-led life we all share with him, will ultimately overcome all the forces that defy God, forces that rob God's creatures of the full life that God intends for us.**

In other words, sacred stories form our intuition at a deeper level. Franciscan priest and mystic Richard Rohr explains the importance of what he calls the "great healing myths":

Our myths are stories or images that are not always true in particular but entirely true in general. They are usually not historical fact, but invariably they are spiritual genius. They hold life and death, the explainable and the unexplainable together as one; they hold together the paradoxes that the rational mind cannot process by itself. As good poetry does, myths make unclear and confused emotions brilliantly clear and life changing.

Myths are true basically because they work! A sacred myth keeps a people healthy, happy, and whole – even inside their pain. They give deep meaning, and pull us into "deep time" (which encompasses all time, past and future... and not just our little time or culture). Such stories are the very food of the soul....<sup>2</sup>

**Despite all the evidence to the contrary, is it possible that the death-dealing powers of this world are in retreat? Is it possible that God still**

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<sup>1</sup> <https://members.sundaysandseasons.com/Home/TextsAndResources#resources>.

<sup>2</sup> *Falling Upward*, xxx, xxxi.

**intends to realize God's dream of justice and peace? Is it possible that Jesus of Nazareth in Galilee was appointed, as Ofelia Ortega puts it, to "disrupt the undisturbed presence of evil"<sup>3</sup> such that he might convince as many of us as possible to join him?**

Our skepticism says no. But, our sacred story says yes. That's why we come back week after week to hear it and allow it to interpret our lives. That's why we eat a piece of bread and take a sip of wine and trust that it's a foretaste of a great feast that is yet to come. That's why we embrace all people into this community, and especially those who've been hurt by religion, that together we might share a sustaining hope. And, that's why together we go out to encounter and rebuke evil wherever we find it, confident that when we do, we stand under the authority of Jesus himself.

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<sup>3</sup> *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Vol. 1, 312.