

Epiphany 4B (1/28/2018)
Deuteronomy 18:15-20
Psalm 111
1 Corinthians 8:1-13
Mark 1:21-28

We are not defined by our demons. No matter what else clamors to possess us, Christ encounters us with a compelling word and claims our whole lives for God.

What do we do about unpredictable behavior in church? From time to time, a visitor wanders into the sanctuary and immediately stands out on account of his appearance or mannerisms or speech. Maybe he is disheveled, or unsteady on his feet, or prone to outbursts. As a result, his presence is unsettling. *Everyone is welcome here*, we remind ourselves, yet we can't help but feel a little anxious about how he might impact our time together in worship. Admittedly, when I notice a visitor like that, my mind usually goes first to how I will address any disruption he might cause.

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Our Gospel from Mark today has a powerful word to speak to this question. Jesus and company arrive in Capernaum where he is scheduled to serve as a guest preacher. And, he astounds the whole synagogue with the power of his words. "He taught as one having authority," Mark explains, "and not as the scribes." But, what a disruption, that in the middle of the sermon a man with a demon suddenly shouts, "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." It's worth noting that even as the people are just beginning to work out Jesus' identity, the demon recognizes him immediately. But, imagine the assembly's alarm. The orderliness of Sabbath worship is interrupted by an outburst from an unstable man. His grammar is confused, and his utterances are outside the sphere of their comprehension. The people

must be taken aback, even frightened, and they might quietly wish that the man with the demon had never shown up to synagogue in the first place.

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Jesus doesn't hesitate. "Be silent," he rebukes the demon, "and come out of him!" And immediately, yet not without violent protest, the demon obeys, leaving the man shaken but free from his affliction. This exorcism confirms the divine legitimacy Jesus has already demonstrated through his preaching: "What is this? A new teaching – with authority!" the people exclaim. **Jesus does not simply edify, as would any compelling teacher, but by his word he exercises power over forces that are otherwise beyond human control.** "He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him."

Mark's original audience would not have questioned his description of demon possession or the efficacy of Jesus' exorcism. Ancient people accepted the existence of competing spirits, both holy and unholy, as an aspect of their worldview. And, although we who live in the modern age are less likely to frame affliction in terms of demon possession, we nevertheless recognize an array of influences that seek to possess us. We even refer to some of them as "demons": psychological disorders, depression and anxiety, trauma, addiction, grief, fear, resentment, cynicism, shame, regret. **Each of us knows our own demons, even if we hide them well from others and ourselves – entrenched patterns of thought, feeling, and behavior, often born of painful experience, that prevent us from living full, healthy lives. We are captive, and cannot free ourselves.**

So, what does Mark's Gospel have to say to us? First of all, it speaks to how we respond to people with visible demons in our midst. **If the incarnate Word of God promises to meet them in their affliction and liberate them by his command, a promise he fulfills through the words and actions of his living body, then the**

welcome we offer visitors among us is Christ's own welcome, and the peace we offer is Christ's own peace.

But we have demons, too, and Jesus' liberating word is also meant for us. He speaks for God, and **God not intend for us to suffer under the oppression of whatever threatens to take hold of us, but God takes hold of us instead. God names us beloved, affirming our fundamental dignity and embracing us with unshakable love. The mark of Christ's cross and the accompaniment of the Holy Spirit at baptism signify that nothing, nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.**¹

Yet, it can be difficult to accept God's claim on our lives unless we are also willing to face down our demons. Pastor Janet Peterman has published a series of liturgies intended to shed light on suffering that is not typically acknowledged publicly in church, and to set it in the context of God's redeeming mercy. The following is an excerpt from "Meditations for Finding Your Voice: A Daily Ritual for Those Who Have Been Sexually Abused." As you hear it, I invite you to listen for a divine word of healing and freedom:

[Excerpt from *Speaking to Silence: New Rites for Christian Worship and Healing*²]

Dear church, **you are not defined by your demons. Whatever else clamors to possess you, the promise of the gospel is that Christ encounters you with a compelling word and claims your whole life for God. And in the end, what possesses you is love.** Rest now in the grace of this promise, offer a word of gratitude and praise to God as you are able, and when you go, go in peace.

¹ Romans 8:38-39.

² 83-91.