

Feb 7, 2021
Rev. Jane Florence
Troubled Spirits
Mark 1: 21-28



You've just heard a short story from our scripture today. It is very short because that's the way Mark wrote, in quick, to the point, fast-moving snippets. Here we are just twenty verses into the first chapter of his story of Jesus and Mark has told of John the Baptist, of Jesus' baptism, his time in the wilderness, the gathering of his core team, and now, his first act of ministry. With broad strokes, Mark paints the scene and leaves his readers to fill in the details. If you connect with a movie or a book, chances are it is because you identified with a character. Where are you in the story? Mark doesn't spend too much time drawing the readers into the story with character development. You will have to slow it down a bit to find your place. Think a minute about all those present and what they bring to the story.

Obviously, there's Jesus. It is tempting to cast ourselves in the role of the Savior. Jesus speaks and acts with authority. He knows he is doing God's work, but this is his first gig. I remember entering the sanctuary on my first Sunday in my first appointment fresh out of seminary. I remember years before that when the 8:30 bell rang at my first teaching job on the first day. Both instances, I had been trained, I believed I was in the right place, I presented myself with authority, but my innards were as strong as a bowl of jello. I wonder how Jesus felt his first day on the job? Do you remember your first day in a new experience?

Speaking of first day on the job, Peter, James, John and Andrew have just signed on to follow Jesus. He walked up to their fishing boat and said, "come follow me!" and they did. Now they have their first experience of Jesus – teaching with authority and commanding unclean spirits and suddenly gaining fame. I wonder if they are wondering -just what they've gotten themselves into? Maybe you've been there before. It seems like a good idea at first, but maybe doesn't appear to be going as you expected... ?

Speaking of on the job, there are the scribes. This is not their first day on the job. They've been working at this synagogue for years. They've been explaining the scriptures over and over and over. They've been showing up day after day after day, year after year - passing down the truths of their faith from generations. Today, they come to work, and some new guy is in town. Jesus teaches; but his teachings are different than what they have always taught before. Jesus hits a 'home run' and gets a standing ovation. How does it feel when the new guy at work shines like new penny and your loyal and faithful service for years is treated like yesterday's meatloaf? How's it feel when what you've spent your life doing is challenged- undone even, by some nobody with no authority? and he gains fame!

There are plenty of perspectives to consider here. Maybe you identified with Jesus, or the disciples or the scribes in the story. Did anyone immediately identify with the man- you know, the one with the 'unclean spirit'? Usually not.

Now, I've tended to think of this guy in my mind- as a ragged, wild-eyed, wretch. I've imagined his hair all sticking out crazy like Einstein. He's some stinky dude, foaming at the mouth or talking to the walls. Probably those aren't right. The scripture says – "there was in their synagogue- a man with an unclean spirit." "There in their synagogue" means he was one of them; he was a member of the congregation. A wild-eye foaming at the mouth soul would not have been permitted in. So, if he was part of the synagogue, he probably looked a lot like everyone else. Usually congregations do.

Let me tell you about Travis Park UMC in the heart of downtown San Antonio, Texas. Like many old churches in downtown urban settings, eighty years ago, it was THE historic "mother" Methodist Church of the city full of prestige and power. Like so many old churches in downtown urban settings, its members began moving to the suburbs, country clubs, gated communities. Shopping malls and office complexes sprang up out at the loop around town, so Downtown changed. Cardboard boxes and thread-bear blankets replaced the fur coats that once warmed people on Travis Street. Like so many old churches in declining downtown urban settings, Travis Park UMC was faced with either closing their doors or deciding to be in ministry to and with a new population. They chose the latter. Instead of shutting out the downtown homeless, they started serving free breakfast on Sunday mornings and inviting people in; they remodeled the basement to offer showers and restrooms for the street people; they opened a clothes closet and a dental clinic. The mahogany pews and marbled narthex became sanctuary for the people on the streets.

I knew the pastors of Travis Park well. During a difficult season of my life, another Dark Night of the Soul, I longed to worship, but church was also a painful setting of my wounding. Each time I crossed the threshold into any church tears sprang to my eyes. I tried slipping unnoticed into Lutheran and Presbyterian and Episcopalian churches wanting no one to know the woman crying in the pews. I finally went to Travis Park. I stepped into the grand marble entryway, and I my eyes filled with tears. Keeping my head down, I knew the way up the back staircase into the darker shadows of the balcony. Surely, I could hide and worship unnoticed up here, so I thought. Travis Park was built in a familiar style of this church in the 1900's with the balcony wrapping around the main floor. During the opening hymn, three youth came into the balcony and took a spot on the other side of the arc. They were far enough away to leave me in hiding. Then a man entered and sat to my left just a few rows back. I didn't turn to look at him, but I knew he was there. Too close to my hiding spot of solitude for my comfort, but as long as I faced forward, my countenance was hidden. We sang some songs and offered some prayers then the preacher stepped up to the mic. As the sermon began, the man behind me began to mumble to himself. As the preacher continued, the man's mumbling became louder. Finally, the man behind me called out a question to the preacher below us.

The preacher continued his sermon, and I gave thanks that I had never had a heckler so bold; my adversaries had launched more subtle attacks. The preacher continued, and the man behind me announced another question for the room. The first few outbursts were

‘politely ignored’ by preacher and congregation alike, but it was apparent that this man was used to being ignored on the streets, and he had long ago learned how to make himself heard. At his next outburst, the preacher stopped mid-sentence and turned to face the man in the balcony seated two rows behind me. Of course, all eyes of the congregation followed the preacher’s gaze peering right into my hiding space. With grace and compassion, the preacher said, “Thank you, John. Allow me to finish here, and I’d be happy to visit with you after I’m done.”

The homeless man who didn’t understand congregational etiquette was part of the church there. He called out his question and allowed himself to be seen openly and honestly. He was not hiding in the shadows; he was known by name. The homeless man in that San Antonio church was not some wild-eyed, crazy man broken beyond community. No, the one with the broken spirit- being held captive by fear or grief or anger or ego- was the lady seated two rows in front of him. The ones with the ‘unclean’ broken spirits are those of us who hide ourselves away – unable or unwilling in moments to live in the Light of God’s love.

In the synagogue the man with the unclean spirit was healed by Jesus. Now, to be sure, the cure wasn’t painless. When the healing takes place, the man cries out again and falls into convulsions. Exposing our vulnerabilities (our inner demons of fear, grief, anger, guilt, resentment...) pulls us out of our dark hiding places into the light of truth where growth and healing and recovery can take place. It’s not easy, but it is possible.

Mark Nepo writes, “When gripped by fear or anxiety, the reflex is to hold on, speed up, or remove oneself. Yet when we feel the reflex to hold on, that is usually the moment we need to let go. When we feel the urgency to speed up, that is typically the instant we need to slow down. Often when we feel the impulse to flee, it is the opportunity to face ourselves.”

That is our opportunity in this sacred, safe community each week. Here, in a community of God’s grace, in person or on screen, we gather before tables signifying God’s love and healing. Here we can let go, slow down, and come to know ourselves as beloved children of God, pilgrims on the road together. Thanks be to God.