

1) In the story Mark just told us, did any of you, by any chance, hear any mention of demons?

If not, chances are you were deep in sleep.

In her sermon two weeks ago, Susan said: *Jesus casts out demons—lots of them in Mark.*

Well, let me count the ways:

- In this story: demons, demons, demons—three times in the space of three verses, followed quickly on by a fourth.
(As if to say, *Oh, by the way, did I mention that Jesus deals with demons?*)
- In Last Sunday's story, Jesus' first teaching in the synagogue was interrupted by a man with a screaming demon.
Jesus shuts that demon up and sends it packing.
- There are three other dramatic demon scenes in Mark:
 - A desperate mother pleads for her demon-ridden daughter—Jesus finally obliges.
 - A desperate father begs for his demon-infested son—Jesus grants his request
 - On another screaming man—a self-torturing, tomb dweller—
Jesus does an intervention on.

Mark tells this story not just in vivid, but in violent detail.

Matthew and Luke briefly tell it too;

but Mark, by far the shortest Gospel storyteller, just goes on and on.

If you made a movie of Mark's telling,

by comparison, other exorcist flicks would seem like family entertainment.

- Demons, or demon talk crop up five other times in Mark—
not to mention the crucifixion, where naming the obvious is hardly necessary.

You get the point: For Mark, talk about demon possession seems almost an obsession.

Every time we wince, and try politely to look the other way,

Mark jerks our heads back around, and puts the demonic right back under our noses.

2) Well, it's embarrassing. We know so much more about mental illness than they did back then.

And about the biological, physiological, psychological, and social sources of many kinds of illness.

We have no need of a demon hypothesis—superstitious fears of supernatural terrorists.

Thank goodness for research and drugs and all kinds of treatment programs.

Thank God we don't burn witches anymore . . .

I'd love to dismiss Mark's demon talk with a benign little pat on his benighted little head:

There, there, Mark, it's not your fault. You just didn't know any better.

But the closer I listen to him, the less convinced I am that I can write him off so easily.

3) There is, of course, more in today's story than demons—and it's much easier to listen to:

Jesus heals Peter's mother-in-law, and then goes off to pray. We'll come back to that:

For now, I'm taken with the two screaming demon stories Mark places on either side—

the demon-driven man in the synagogue (presumably a God fearing Jew),

and the demon-driven man in the tombs (presumably a Gentile pagan).

Neither just walks on stage; each character is firmly in place when the scenes open.

Each man is deeply embedded in his own social order.

Both men are trapped in systems that are . . . well . . . driving them crazy.

And, no matter how you define the word "demon,"

whatever possesses these men is hell bent on keeping them imprisoned right where they are;

When Jesus approaches, key to the jail cell in his hand, the demons pitch a fit.

- 4) The self-wounding man in the tombs lives in territory that has been overrun by Roman legions. The demonic that tears this man apart self-identifies as “legion”—
 not *many* (as in multiple personality disorder)
 but *many* as in wave upon wave of soldiers in military onslaught.
 Individuals, communities, social infrastructures overrun, decimated, left irreparably broken.
 And worse, far worse, turning on themselves; perpetuating the relentless tearing.
- 5) The man in the synogogue is possessed by demons of fear. Why?
 What’s to be afraid of in the synogogue?
 Well, Jesus, Mark says, has just taught there with authority
 (as his listeners recognize with amazement)—
 not the kind of authority that restricts, but the kind of authority that empowers.
 Himself a faithful Jew, Jesus scrapes away layers of what has come to seem, for ordinary people,
 law for the sake of law—law to protect God’s law from pagan contamination.
 Over time, alas, these defensive moves have become incarcerating
 to those they were meant to liberate.
 But, as we all can testify, the constrictions we know and live with,
 can be much easier to live with than the wide open freedom we can scarcely imagine.
 No wonder the screaming demon howls in terror: *Have you come to destroy us?*
 Yes, in fact, Jesus has come to destroy them—not the man, but the demons.
- 6) MK’s relentlessly preoccupation with the demonic, you see, has little to do
 with what can be prescribed for and medicated,
 with what can be reduced to and accounted for in strictly biological or behavioristic terms
 with what can be prevented or ameliorated by any social or political program
 regardless of one’s political or economic predispositions,
 regardless of one’s best humanitarian intentions.
 At the end of the day, however you name it, there remains
 that which tears us apart from our truest selves, and dismembers us one from another.
 It operates in and through a host of physical, psychological, and social factors,
 all of which we need to better understand, and address as best we can.
 But what Mark is talking about cannot be reduced to these factors, any or all.
 Mark calls it “demons,” “unclean spirits.”
 You call it what you like. At the end of the day, there it is.
 I’m still haunted by one way Joe Clark described it in his sermon last Sunday:
 It is not only our failures that can divide us from ourselves, Joe said.
 Our very successes can easily do so as well.
 And, as another fabled preacher, Fred Craddock says:
When I am at war with myself, I tend to make casualties of those whom I love.
 (Let alone those I have no clue about or care about.)
 Think of what the news has brought us this week—soccer riots in Egypt, more carnage in Syria—
 a political primary in Florida, where millions upon millions have been spent,
 to convince one party’s faithful, that one of their candidate is worse qualified than the other,
 to take up the task of showing the country
 that its current leader is far worse than either of them.
 I know this is terribly simplistic, but I can’t help wistfully wondering
 if there might have been other ways to spend all that money for healing a broken body politic.
 And I am profoundly sobered by an ever deepening realization
 that it is precisely when we start demonizing others that the demonic is released among us.

The process feeds on itself, picking up speed and intensity.

What commences as a deliberate, calculated desire to control (perhaps even for good) morphs or metastasizes into evil utterly out of our control.

Perhaps, then, you have a sense of why I've been haunted this week by Mark's relentless naming of what needs not just to be treated or fixed or averted or contained, but, rather to be cast out.

- 7) In all his demon naming, Mark is not feeding a natural fascination with violence or the occult. He is realistically depicting what happens when thick darkness is pierced by clear light. Jesus sweeps onto the scene, announcing with authority the Reign of God; and all hell breaks loose. If you have ever undergone or undertaken an intervention, if you have ever been involved in an effort to effect a communal or corporate culture change, you know full well that when demons are named they tend to scream. But all that noise, deafening as it is, is ultimately only a distraction from Jesus' work of healing. In describing the beginning of Jesus' ministry, Mark's narrative is carefully crafted to show that announcing God's Reign, and displacing demons are inseparably related aspects of Jesus' mission—opposite sides of the same coin.

- 8) Now, at last, we are ready to come back to the seemingly softer, gentler parts of today's story; namely, Jesus' healing of Peter's mother-in-law, and his going off to pray. On face of it, Jesus just does a good deed, and then retreats to get a little space; but more is going on than appears at first glance.

Disease brought then, as it does now, not just physical and psychological dysfunction, but social dysfunction as well.

Illness is isolating, the best efforts to the contrary of everyone around.

If that is true now; it was especially true then.

Jesus reaches out, to his colleague's close relative, extends a hand, raises her up, gives her strength, reincorporates her into the community.

Jesus here is acting out the vision of Isaiah:

The vision of an Everlasting God, one who is totally and completely Other, reaching across the divine-human divide with empowering energy:

He gives power to the faint, and strengthens the powerless.

They that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength.

They shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint.

Well and good—but wait a minute—what's the good?

This woman's energy is simply recaptured by the subversive patriarchal system; isn't it?

Mark seems to say as much: as soon as she is on her feet, she goes about serving all the men.

No, that is exactly what Mark is NOT saying. The word he uses for "serve" here is *diakonia*.

Mark employs this word only to describe the service to which Jesus calls his male disciples—what Paul describes today in his letter to the Corinthians as his own role in sharing the gospel.

As Markan scholar Ched Meyers says succinctly:

Both at the outset and at the conclusion of MK's Gospel,

women, in a society which devalued them, are identified as the true disciples.

In this healing MK is serving notice that patriarchy

and the devaluation of women will be overturned.

In other words, the healing of this woman has the same effect as the exorcism of the two men.

Demons are cast out, healing comes, the reign of God is on the move and gathering momentum.

- 9) How is can Jesus do this? Mark gives us a clue, I think.
Before he begins his ministry Jesus is tempted by the demonic,
and when he is, angels minister to him.
What Jesus does for bedeviled people, therefore,
is exactly what God's angels have already done for him.
And because Jesus knows how vulnerable he is to the demonic forces he contends with,
he goes out, not for a little R&R, but to be ministered to afresh—
so that he can go back to naming demons and casting them out without demonizing anyone—
not even those who are bent on, and will succeed in, doing him to death.
- 10) One more thing about Mark and demons—
early on, Jesus gives his disciples authority to do what he does—
casting out demons most specifically.
They don't do a great job of it.
Utter failures, actually, in one of the stories we cited early on.
When they blow it, Jesus has to come in and do the job
with the demon possessed son of the begging father.
But it is in Galilee where they get commissioned,
it is in Galilee where Jesus' first healings and demon dispatchings take place.
At the empty tomb, the understandably fearful disciple women are told
that Jesus has gone ahead to Galilee, and has promised to meet them there.
So these healing, demon-casting, reign-of-God announcing interns will get a second Galilee rotation
and a third and a fourth—however many it takes to do the demons in, and get the gospel out.
- 11) You and I have been thus authorized as well. How do we do this?
We do this not, by spinning magic spells, but by naming the demons, as we see them,
and doing so without demonizing those whom they inhabit.
We do this by reaching out our hands and lifting folks up—
like Jesus does for Peter's-mother-in-law, and like God's angels do for Jesus.
Like Jesus, we go back, again and again
to receive the energy we need to speak and act in healing ways.
And, as we do that, who knows how many demons, through God's healing energy,
you and I, individually and together, might just be able to cast out.