

4th Sunday after Epiphany
Sermon 1.31.21

Mark 1:21-28

²¹ They went to Capernaum; and when the sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught. ²² They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes. ²³ Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, ²⁴ and he cried out, "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." ²⁵ But Jesus rebuked him, saying, "Be silent, and come out of him!" ²⁶ And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him. ²⁷ They were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, "What is this? A new teaching—with authority! He^{al} commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him." ²⁸ At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee. (157)

The unclean spirit presumed destruction. Maybe that's what makes for an unclean spirit. Maybe that's the essence of what an unclean spirit is: a presumption that someone is going to be destroyed, that the world is just one big battlefield and there are gonna be winners and losers, destroyers and those who'll be destroyed, and that the chief aim of any of us should be our own survival.

"How are we to understand this 'unclean spirit,'" you ask? "How are we moderns to understand this thing that seems so pre-modern—an unclean spirit?"

Maybe that's how. Unclean spirits presume a zero-sum reality.

Not so foreign to the modern mindset after all, huh? Like, take this week, for example. One particularly exuberant Redditor wrote of GameStop and the hedge funds that had bet on its destruction: "WE ARE AT WAR YOU MOTHER F*C%ERS GIVE THEM NOTHING BUT TAKE EVERYTHING!!!!!!!"

Unclean spirits, then: they're positively everywhere.

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

I wonder, does darkness get destroyed when you turn on a light? Or does it simply get banished, set to flight? Or does it get brought to the light, redeemed? What is dark might feel as destroyed when, brought to light, it is in truth redeemed.

Hm.

When I was newly ordained, I was often surprised by how provocative this new state was to people I'd meet. They wanted to know what that was about, one person even once asking me, "What's *that* about?" They wanted to know what *I* was about.

One young woman, a new volunteer at Gould Farm and a pious one at that, asked me one day at lunch whether I thought we were in the midst of a great spiritual battle. I was confused by the question. I'd never thought of it like that. I'd never thought of God like that, in the midst of a great cosmic battle. It certainly wasn't how I *felt* God to be. Being, not fighting, not struggling, simply being, forcefully, assuredly being. "I Am," the name that this God offered to Moses when Moses asked after that. "I Am." It was Hitler who claimed, "My struggle," or "My fight," which is what *Main Kampf* means. God simply claimed, "I Am."

As for this young woman, she was testing me, testing the Monterey Church, to see whether she should attend now that she was settled into her life as a volunteer, and ready to venture out a bit. I said as much, "I feel like you're testing me."

"No," she said. She was just curious, though I was unconvinced.

"No," I said, "I don't think we're in a great cosmic battle." Of course, I was young too, so I probably didn't sound all that sure of myself. Maybe I should think we're in a great cosmic battle? Maybe that would be a surer and more courageous faith...? Hers, after all, did seem strong. Mine seemed meek, timorous by compare. Sure, I was ordained, but she was ready for battle.

The thing is, though, the God we meet in the Bible, this great and quiet I AM, made manifest in a bush burning though not consumed, is quite often imagined as radically unopposed in proportion to this God. This God has no opposite, no mirrored likeness, no force in equal opposition, or even slightly less-than-equal opposition.

Consider the creation story, the first of the two (for there are two in the Bible, which you'd think would place so-called biblical literalists on the horns of a dilemma, but apparently not). Consider the one in which God spoke and it was so. "Let there be light!" And there was light. "Let there be creeping things." And there were creeping things.

Then compare this to other creation stories of the same era and the same region—for there are many, as many as there are peoples to have told them. Every people and every nation have an origin story, and most pre-historic peoples have an origin story that involves the origin of everything, all there is, and most of these involve a great cosmic battle. Most understand the

creation, this good order and delicate balance, as a result of such a thing. Really, the fact of the world is evidence of the victory of order over chaos or good over evil, and this casts the god, or the gods, of the creation as just barely more powerful than the power of chaos, the power of evil.

It was a narrow victory. Phew!

So, that could break out at any time—the waters of chaos breaking their banks, the power of evil come back for another go. In fact, this power of cosmic destruction is most often imagined as water. What’s more, when it’s imagined as alive, it’s given form in Leviathan, the sea monster, ever lurking midst these chaotic waters, an expression of these chaotic waters, mostly unseen. Enormous! Menacing...

For what it’s worth, Jesus’ walking on water and his calming stormy seas are best understood from within this tradition, a critique of this tradition, an offering of something truer to live out. Ours isn’t to battle chaos, for this is to feed it, to join it, to give it power. Ours is to endure it, unaffected by it, not caught up in it. Ours is to be peace, that we might affect calm, that the reign of grace and good order might reign, and that we might live amidst this promised reign starting now, even right now.

You know, Leviathan does show up in the Bible, in a psalm: “O Lord, how manifold are your works! In wisdom you have made them all; the earth is full of your creatures. Yonder is the sea, great and wide, creeping things innumerable are there, living things both small and great. There go the ships, and Leviathan that you formed to sport in it.” Sort of a bathtub toy for God: Leviathan. That’s how one professor in divinity school put it—a bathtub toy. And he was an orthodox Jew, preeminent in his field. He wasn’t goofing around, so his positing that maybe God sometimes does, goof around, was a position I could take seriously.

Otherwise, according to other framings of the world, we who are on the side of good order must be ever ready for battle, ever vigilant as regards this spiritual warfare. It’s a potent imagining of the world, and of our purpose in it. It’s a potent deception. The notion that we must *fight*, we must *FIGHT*—it’s generative of a lot of life. Listen for that word; watch for it. It’s a common call out there, a distressingly common call.

Have you ever wondered why we have *so many* superhero movies? How many superhero movies does one culture need?

The story of the first chapter of Genesis is an astonishing departure from all this. Here, the formless void, the darkened deep, are the things out of which creation emerged. But they're not imagined as conquered. They're imagined as...what? Reined in? Hemmed in? Bound? Redeemed?

How does a tangled ball of yarn *feel* about becoming a blanket? How does random movement *feel* about becoming a choreographed dance? How do words feel about becoming a sermon or a play, contributing to that, *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*, or the Gospel according to Mark? If I were a word, I'd be happy about that. Better than just random potential. Better: fulfilled purpose.

This isn't to say there's nothing of this world that operates in opposition to God. No, of course not, for those things proliferate. Worse, some of those things are powerful indeed, irresistible. Really, history and its machinations can feel like a machine, parts of which we each are, the resistance of which is all but impossible.

There was a musical from the 60s called "Stop the World! I Want to Get Off!" Every time the character who was known for saying that said that, it was to try to extricate himself from the automatic nature of his life, and by implication all lives.

I mean, whose fault was it, that mob in Washington on January 6th? The people in Capital itself? Those in the government who'd egged them on? QAnon and all its adherents online? Some have argued that we're all to blame. They argue it cynically, to shift responsibility from Donald Trump, the Proud Boys and their ilk, and everyone who actually broke into the capitol building that day. But you could argue that point earnestly.

When I was teaching twelfth grade, one of my students committed suicide. I had twelve students before spring break, and I came back to my classroom to eleven students. She'd written a lot of troubling stuff for my class, but they all did to a certain degree. They were twelfth graders. They're all about personal drama, tragedy, the struggle for identity and purpose.

For months following her death, I worked through my reaction to it in conversation with one friend particular.

"It sounds like you feel guilty," she said. "You're not responsible, you know."

Yes, that was true.

"But it happened on my watch," I said. "I was close."

“Not close enough to stop it,” she said.

Also true.

See, though, God does have some opposition—some opposition to the good, some opposition to life abundant.

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

Presuming destruction, this unclean spirit is thus unclean. And it’s striking to me that Jesus doesn’t say he *had* come to destroy this tormenting thing, and then *doesn’t* destroy this tormenting thing, this destroying thing. He just makes it shut up and go away.

This is how Mark understood Jesus. This is how Mark *experienced* Jesus, and how Mark apparently experienced the world, and would have us do as well. Possessed of all sorts of unclean spirits, the world would meet in Jesus someone who could not stand for that or with that, someone who stood for something else altogether, and in whose standing with such holiness made it so the world would fill with holiness. His presence would simply make it so..

It’s a not battle, it’s an arrival, a taking place. This is an occupation of something new and good, full and true.

Stand in that. Stand in that substance, that fullness and goodness. Stand in that glory. You don’t have to fight. You just withstand.

Patience.

Faith.

Someone charged the pulpit once while I was preaching. He came at me, shouting, accusing me. “Why was I preaching on this and not that? Why was talking about this one thing and not this other thing?”

When I didn’t give ground, when I continued to occupy the pulpit and preach what I had prepared to preach, telling him, “Now isn’t the time for you to talk. That time will come, but now it’s time for me to talk,” he lost interest in his charge. “I’m going outside,” he said. He’d been frustrated.

I think I also heard in him some relief.

I wonder if there’s some relief for someone bent on destruction when their bend meets some binding, when their urge to destroy doesn’t win the day. Child psychologists tell us that, when a baby’s rage, bent on destroying the world, meets with a loving embrace and maybe even a

binding, good and tight, a swaddling cloth so well bound that no little fist can break through, no chubby arm could herk or jerk, it's enormously relieving.

You want to destroy everything, but you can't. For babies, now they can finally fall asleep.

Peace.

You've met your limit.

It binds you.

It holds.

Blest be those ties that bind, am I right?

Political theorists will even tell us (some of them) here is freedom. Not being able to do whatever you will or want, whenever and however you will or want, but being bound together in love and mutual accountability, responsible to one another in real and realized ways: here is freedom.

It's Annual Meeting season. Churches everywhere will gather for their annual meetings, a look back on their life together over the previous year. We'll do it here, later this week/after this morning.

It was a terrible year. For me, it would have been so much worse if not for the church, withstanding, standing with.

Thanks be to God.