

Mark 1:21-28 (D.B. Hart Rendition)

²¹And they enter Capernaum and, immediately entering the synagogue on the Sabbath, he taught. ²²And they were astonished at his teaching; for he was teaching them as one having authority and not as the scribes. ²³And immediately there was in their synagogue a man in an impure spirit, and he cried out, ²⁴Saying, "What is there between us and you, Jesus the Nazarene? Did you come to destroy us? I recognize you, who you are, the holy one of God." ²⁵And Jesus rebuked it: "Be silent and come out." ²⁶And the impure spirit, convulsing him and shouting with a loud voice, came out of him. ²⁷And all were astounded, so that they debated among themselves, saying, "What is this? A new teaching, with authority; and he commands the impure spirits and they obey him." ²⁸And the report of him immediately went forth everywhere, into the whole region of Galilee. ~~And, immediately~~ ~~from the~~

When Donald Trump had become someone we were suddenly to take seriously, I found myself arguing in favor of shutting him up, shouting him down. I'd never argued in favor of something like that before. I'd never seen much good in making someone just shut up, stop talking.

This all followed the rally that was to happen in Chicago in March 2016. It ended up being canceled, last minute. Protests at the rally were growing. Thousands of people, from supporters of Bernie Sanders to activists with Black Lives Matter to unaffiliated people showing up at the call of the social media hashtag SHUTITDOWN, all gathered to create such potential for violence that the Trump campaign pulled him last minute.

"Good," was my assessment, a bit to my surprise.

The reaction to follow among media pundits was less of a surprise. Right-wing Rich Lowry called the protest an "indefensible mob action." Left-wing Rachel Maddow claimed it was Trump's violent rhetoric and political imagining that laid the groundwork for the escalation of tensions.

As for me, I found myself arguing from an even more primitive place. I had then, and still have now, less mind for what Donald Trump tends to have to say and more for what effect over a

crowd he could clearly have. With the likes of Trump, we're not in the realm of reason, argument, and persuasion, which would make the *content* of what he had to say the point. No, with him we're in the realm of something far less stable, something potentially far more dangerous. There's an exchange with him and a crowd that isn't about an exchange of ideas. It's about something far less high-of-mind.

That's what I think.

No thanks to Mark, the Gospel according to Mark. No, Mark's gospel would very much have us there as well. I'm sorry to have to tell you, but get ready, buckle up, because Mark's understanding of Jesus will push us into a place of the unstable spiritual rather than even-keeled reasonable more times than not as we follow this gospel through this coming year.

As you perhaps know, we have four gospel narratives in our Bible, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Also as you perhaps know, three of these are so-called synoptic gospels, in that they offer a synopsis of Jesus' life and ministry—Matthew, Mark, and Luke. These are similar to one another but are also strikingly different—which is the sort of thing that could either make you doubt the whole thing (because, I mean, why couldn't they get their story straight?) or could make you come to an even deeper faith (because when someone has a powerful effect, the ways to understand that, and moreover to give image to that, will be varied and ever-newly revealed).

As for Mark's version, his is taken to be the earliest written, probably around the year 70 CE, which is to say forty years after Jesus lived and died and lived again. What's more, this is thought to have come from a time of crisis among the Judean people, crisis unlike they'd known for five hundred years. Rome was cracking down (just like Babylon had done back in the day). Jerusalem had been destroyed (just as Babylon had done back in the day). The Temple had been desecrated and was even now being torn down, stone by stone, its mortar burned into submission so the whole structure could just be pushed apart. The people were scattered into a diaspora that still largely holds today, their numbers thinned out and their existence a threadbare remnant.

It was all very apocalyptic—apocalypse, that grand revealing, that tearing away all pretense and mere appearance so that something more urgently true and enduring pokes its head in. There was a tear in the fabric of reality. At the edges, the seams were coming undone—and then, who knows what would come to reign? It's like the glaciers that are melting. Who knows what's been frozen in that ice, and what will come loose when the thaw arrives?

Mark's telling of Jesus' arrival casts it in these terms. When Jesus was baptized, just a few verses earlier than what we heard today, nothing less happened than that the heavens were torn

open and the Spirit of God came down from where it had been safely cordoned off, hemmed in up in heaven so we of the world were safe from it.

And I don't care if you don't believe this. I'm not asking you to believe it. I'm asking you to go with it. Set aside your analytical mind for a moment, this hard modern frame, and go with your gut, which you know on some level understands the world and whence it came better than your critical faculties possibly could—whence it came, that place reached by evocation and the unconscious and given expression in music and poetry, that roving existence whose truth haunts and disturbs, shakes the foundations and rips off the roof of all our little shelters of control and management and tinkering toward progress.

The heavens were torn open, and God came down, down from where we'd safely tucked him so he couldn't disrupt our very important doings; came down and filled this man, this one man. (And why him? Why not?) This one man filled now with something immediate.

Immediate!

Our writer will rely on this word a lot. Three times in this short reading alone, our writer will recall something as immediate eleven times in this first chapter alone. Consider, in all the New Testament something is declared as "immediate" that is, *euthus*, fifty-nine times, and forty-one of those are in the Gospel according to Mark.

And it would be easy to conclude he maybe wasn't much of a writer. Over-reliance on one word suggests a fairly small vocabulary. Certainly, it's been thought of this particular book that we're in the hands of a weak writer.

It's also a little annoying, let's just admit, to hear the same word over and over again. It grates on the ear.

...which might be why some translations compensate in this regard. Why, the one I usually use really gives Mark cover. The New Revised Standard Version, the "NRSV," finds more varied expression for all three "immediates" in our gospel portion today. One of the three is rendered, "just then." Another of the three is rendered, "at once." The third of three is left out altogether. But all three are *euthus*, "immediately," which David Bentley Hart makes clear. His rendering is more a transliteration than translation, and therefore reads more like something written by someone who didn't have a mind for editing, who didn't a backspace key and all the bits and bites in the world.

But I've come around to rethink my supposing that Mark was a weak writer or, my more charitable judgement, that he was writing under serious duress. Though he likely was writing

under duress, getting this story down in some form that might endure while all the people who knew to tell it were being scattered or slaughtered, he also, I think now, meant what he said, and there's no better word for it than *euthus*, immediate.

Something is immediate when it has no medium for its transmission or arrival, no mediator. Something that is present of its own accord. An arrival of the utterly real. The advent of the irrefutably real.

The Internet has brought all sorts of wonderful things to our lives. But one thing it has threatened, this medium of all media, this king of the devices that make abstract and notional the real: one thing it has threatened is a common experience of the real. So much of our lives comes mediated now, more than ever, more than would have been thought possible up until not too long ago. And, I think it has contributed to the loss of more minds than is fun to consider. I'm convinced of that. The remove of the real is disorienting to a degree that more than a few people simply can't handle it, and because we're not made to handle it. Likewise, much of our shared life falls to this threat too.

If you don't mind me getting weird again, I think this has spiritual implications. The world as we've occupied it for most of human history has involved a tight connection between a thing and our capacity to come to terms with that thing. Our use of words and language is literally a coming to terms, so we can name our experience, which helps us cope with it.

This is the phenomenon of symbols—that we can use symbols to come to terms with our experience of life, which helps us to function and moreover to function together in a shared reality, a commons, if you will.

But there's been this increasing remove from our experience of life, an increasing abstraction from the commons of our lives, so that the symbols we employ don't necessarily couple with what real thing they might claim to symbolize. And, get this, the opposite of the symbolical, when the symbol closely couples with that which it's meant to give sign to, is diabolical, when there's distance or even a division between that which is and that which we're calling it. There's a distance, or even division, between what's real and what we're imaging it to be so we can come to terms with it and function in relation to it.

Now we're in George Orwell's realm, he who gave to our common imagination the notion of double-speak, in his novel *1984*, when what the Party said it was doing was the exact opposite of what it was actually doing, when what the Party called something was the exact opposite of what it truly was. These fundamental lies: the result was for citizens such utter isolation of one person

from the next that they were easily dominated by totalitarian rule and each utterly alone in a world that was no longer intelligible, could longer be related to or foster relationships amidst.

The so-called unclean spirit, encountered in the synagogue that day when Jesus was just starting out: he recognized him, he recognized Jesus, called him by his true name: Jesus of Nazareth, the Holy One of Israel. No one else until now in this gospel narrative had recognized him so utterly, though they responded to him as such. The call of the first disciples had taken place in the verses prior to these, and there we see these four men (Andrew, Philip, James, and John) respond to Jesus just so immediately, though none showed any sign that they knew exactly *why*. The unclean spirit did. It's as if it could recognize, from its polar extreme of uncleanness, its polar opposite, utter holiness, in such a way as we, who occupy this more nuanced, messy middle, might tend to be a little more confused—about what is Holy and what is *not*.

I know I don't trust my perceiving in that regard, not entirely, not entirely.

I know I hold a large measure of doubt when it comes to my sensing whether something is good or is very much not, whether something is operating among the truly symbolical or the deeply, divisively diabolical.

What's more, to be honest, I prefer the messy middle, this moderate terrain of sort of and kind of and not really. I'll leave the extremes of God and of not-God to those very powers, God and not-God, of whom God is the stronger, by the way. Rest assured: God is the stronger.

But this, my preference for the more moderate places in this wild existence: this is probably why I was surprised to assess it as good, the shutting down of that political rally. It's not a safe place, this what's come to called "Cancel Culture," arguing for such condemning containment. It's not a reasonable or right stance generally to take—to shut something up rather than to give it its due, to engage it, so perhaps to persuade it or at least to relate with it, to come to some commons on which together each to stand.

But there are things that dwell beyond the realm in which we generally live and move and have our being. That's what Mark's gospel would have us know anyway, that's what Mark's understanding of Jesus would have us understand, with grave caution, with a measure of fear and trembling. It's not for nothing, this unclean spirit saying to Jesus, "What is there between us and you, Jesus of Nazareth," whose Greek could also suggest something of the common: "What do we share in common, Jesus of Nazareth? What common ground are you trying to establish here?" the offense of Jesus being, according to this unclean thing, that Jesus has come to occupy a place that

is not his to occupy, that this patch of ground is for things unclean only, that Jesus should take his holiness back to heaven where it belongs, should leave the world to its own terrible devices.

The thing is, according to Mark, God has no intention of returning to his place of containment. God has no intention of returning to heaven so the world can just burn—neither then, when Mark’s world truly was burning, nor now, I suppose and moreover I hope, now when we seem as a whole world to be playing with matches.

We’re in for quite a year ahead. Turns out, 2024 will be host to elections in over sixty countries, elections in which, many of them, democracy is up against autocracy. These will effect half the world’s population, around four billion people, and it’s predicted to amount to more political turnover, and quite possibly turmoil, than has ever been the case since we’ve been conscious of global politics and will be unmatched until 2048 when election cycles will coincide once again.

And I don’t suppose it’s all that helpful to go into a year like this one with a mind for spiritual warfare. I don’t find it all that helpful in general to think of interpersonal conflict or international geopolitics in terms of the unclean picking a fight with the holy. No, I think it’s a lot more useful to try to stay in the higher mind, the realm of reason and the task of tinkering our way toward better living for all the world.

But I think we’re wise also to remember what Sunday mornings with Mark would teach us, that there are elemental truths come to bear—and these push us to seeing the world less as one to tinker with and more as one desperately to pray about, one amidst which raggedly to watch for signs of salvation whose advent is our last best hope.

One of my favorite hymns is the one we’re about to sing, its text a poem Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote, on the eve of the new year 1945. Just four months before he would be executed by the Gestapo, he wrote it from his prison cell where the Nazis held him. He was a prisoner for having participated in a failed conspiracy to kill Adolph Hitler, murder probably not a thing he ever imagined he would conspire to do.

I love this hymn, but I rarely have us sing it because it’s strong medicine, too strong for what sickness we usually bring to church.

But every once in a while, we remember.

Every once in a while, we’re wise to go to the edge, to the end of the known world, which we, in our modern ingenuity, have made sterile of the spirits that used to be thought as running roughshod. We’re wise to wonder whether it’s all so compliant to our understanding of things.

And when we find that it's not, here's where we arrive in faith: that God is the stronger, that Jesus is God's advent, and that the reign of the perfect good is our home, is both where we headed and how we get there, our end and our means for reaching it.

We are caught up in things we can only hardly understand. And most catchy of all is God, the alpha and omega, our origin and our end. Alleluia! Amen.