

The Power of Christ Compels You
Mark 1:21–28
Sunday, January 31, 2021

Ever since I was a kid, I have loved to watch horror movies. I can remember when I was four years old, a babysitter let me and my brother watch a movie about Jack the Ripper. And while I was absolutely terrified to walk down the dark hallway to my bedroom after that, I was hooked. There was something exhilarating about it. Something forbidden. Something that made it feel like I was stepping into this realm of powers that I did not fully understand and that I could not control; like this cosmic battle between good and evil. And so since then I have seen all the classics – *Halloween*, *Friday the 13th*, *A Nightmare on Elm Street*, *Jaws*, *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* – and now our oldest, Brandon, is starting to get into them, so I’m slowly introducing him to the classics.

But there is one movie that, while I *like* it, I cannot watch anymore. The last time I sat down and watched it all the way through was in college, over 20 years ago. And that is *The Exorcist*. I just can’t watch it anymore. It freaks me out more than any other movie. If you’re not familiar with *The Exorcist*, it came out in 1973, and it is the story of a 12-year-old girl named Regan who is possessed by a demon, and the two Catholic priests who come to perform an exorcism. It is *incredibly* graphic and deeply unsettling. There are stories about people passing out or getting sick in the theaters while they watched it; stories of people *hiding* in the theaters because they were so scared and having to be helped out of their hiding place when the movie ended. And it’s not like the kind of scary where someone jumps around the corner and scares you. It is a much deeper, unsettling, psychological kind of scary, and I cannot watch it anymore.

And, you know, I think we do something similar with stories like the one in our reading from Mark, where Jesus casts out an unclean spirit. This was the reading from the lectionary, the

assigned calendar of scripture readings each week, and when I first saw it when I was planning out the sermons months ago, my immediate response was, “I’m not going to preach on *that*.” For the most part, we just kind of conveniently ignore these stories in scripture. Especially Presbyterians, we look at these stories of demonic possession and Jesus casting out demons, and we try to provide rational explanations and write it off to a “prescientific” understanding of medical issues. We say that what *they* thought of as demonic possession would today be understood as epilepsy. For a lot of us, these stories don’t fit into our understandings of life and our narratives of faith. And so we just don’t deal with them.

But this is a part of the story of our faith. It is Jesus’ first act of public ministry in Mark’s gospel; it’s the first thing he *does* after calling his disciples. And there are three or four of these stories in Mark’s gospel, which is *a lot* for such a short book. So there is something about this that is *significant* for Mark, and we *need* to deal with it. We need to pay attention to it. We need to take it seriously. And I think we begin to *do* that by acknowledging that there are a lot of strange things in this universe. Things that cannot be fully understood or given rational explanations. But that doesn’t make them any less *real*. How can one particle be in two different places at the exact same time? I don’t know, but it *can*. Scientists have *observed* that, even if they can’t fully *explain* it. There are sometimes when it seems like the line between the possible and the impossible, the natural and the supernatural, or between this life and the next is *very thin*.

So we have to start by acknowledging that there are forces at work in this world that defy logic and that we don’t fully understand and that are beyond our control; forces of *good* and forces of *evil*. Evil is a very present reality in our world. We don’t have to look very hard to see that. But what we see *here*, and what we *trust* in, is that Christ holds power over them all, over all these

forces; that Christ rules and reigns over heaven and earth, over this life and the next; and that Christ can deliver us from *all that* which plagues us. That's part of the promise of this story.

Now, that being said – and not to make light of it – to the best of my knowledge no one in the church is currently possessed by an unclean spirit. And in my 15 years of ministry, I have never had to perform an exorcism. (I came *close* once, but that's a story for another time.) So what is this text saying to *us, today*?

One of the most powerful scenes in the movie *The Exorcist* is toward the end, when the two priests are splashing holy water onto the possessed girl and saying, “The power of Christ compels you!” Over and over again, they chant this refrain, “The power of Christ compels you!” It's this assertion that Christ holds power even over the unclean spirits; that even *they* have to listen to him and obey him.

When we look at this scripture reading, the thing that jumps out at us right away is the man with the unclean spirit and Jesus' conversation with it and eventual casting out of it. But that part of the story is bookended by two separate mentions of Jesus' *authority*. It says, “They were astounded by his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes,” and then after the exorcism it says, “They were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, ‘What is this? A new teaching – with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him.’” That word *authority* is the Greek word *exousia*, and it can best be understood as *power*. To have authority is to have *power* over someone or something.

And so I think that one of the things we're talking about here is the issue of *authority* and *power*. And *that* is actually a very *central concern* in our *country* and the *world* and the *church* today.

What (or *who*) has authority in our world and our lives? What has *power* over us? One of the questions this story forces us to consider is, what are the unclean spirits that have possessed us today, that are plaguing us today, and how do we cast them out?

When Jesus walks into the synagogue, the first thing that the unclean spirit says to him is, “What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us?” When the spirit says, “What have you to do with us,” author and theologian Paul Hooker says that question is best understood as, “What do we have in common with you?”¹ There is an air of *suspicion* in the spirit’s question, a lack of *trust*. It’s less a *question* than it is a *challenge*.² It’s the assumption that Jesus is here, not to help or to heal, but to *hurt*. The spirit speaking through this man instantly sees Jesus as an adversary, an enemy.

I don’t think it’s too hard to draw parallels with our own lives there. We live in a world that is so driven by a spirit of *suspicion* and lack of trust. Anyone who is different from us – who *looks* different or *believes* different or *behaves* different or *sounds* different or *votes* differently than we do is viewed with suspicion, as a *threat* or an *adversary* or an *enemy*. It’s almost like we’ve been conditioned to look at this person who is different from us and ask, “What do we have in common with you,” and to assume that they are not here to *help* us but to *hurt* us; to *destroy* us.

Just look at our whole political discourse recently. It is driven by the fear that this other person who is in a different place than you politically has nothing in common with you and is a threat to your freedom and wellbeing. They want to take away your liberty or your rights or even your *life*. And, to be fair, that fear is not entirely unfounded. We have seen, lately, instances of people motivated to *kill* based on *political differences*. I think that exists at the *extremes* and

¹ Paul Hooker in *Feasting on the Gospels: A Feasting on the Word Commentary (Mark)*, pg. 35.

² Ibid.

does not represent the vast majority of us, but it is there nonetheless. And that suspicion, that lack of trust has been brought about by a lack of *truth*. There are people in positions of power and authority – be it government, media, or religion – who spin and manipulate the truth in an attempt to polarize and divide us in order to maintain their position of power. There is a sense in which we do not *trust* our neighbors because we do not *know* our neighbors. And so when someone tells us that our neighbor is different or wrong or dangerous, it’s almost easier to believe that than it is to actually get to *know* our neighbor.

You can name a lot of unclean spirits that are at work among us today – racism, greed, addiction, many others – but they all seem to have their root in *power*; holding onto a position of power and maintaining power over others. *Power* is the unclean spirit that seems to have possessed so many in our society today. And *that* kind of power stands in direct contrast to the power and authority of Jesus Christ.

Now, right here I’m going to do something a little different. As I was thinking through and writing this sermon, right around this point I started noticing that I was actually working on two *separate* sermons. I could have tried to make them both work as one, but it would have been *way* too long. So I’m going to say, “To be continued,” and we will come back and think about this a little more in a different way next week.

But before we wrap this up, one of the things it says in this reading is that Jesus “taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes.” What does *that* mean? The scribes were Jewish religious leaders who helped people understand scripture. The way they *did* that was by handing on the traditions that had been passed down for generations. They would say, “Here is how

rabbis have talked about and understood a particular teaching throughout history, and based on that, here is the acceptable understanding for *us*.”

So scribes didn't just come up with their own interpretations or teachings, they based everything they did on the teachings and interpretations that came before them. But when *Jesus* came into the synagogue that day, that's not what he was doing. He wasn't just sharing the authoritative teachings of those who came before him. He was teaching as one who had *his own* authority. That's why everyone was so amazed and said, “What is this? A new teaching – with authority!” Jesus' teachings had power, not because of who came *before* him, but because of who *he was* – the Holy One of God.

And related to that, an important detail in this story is that the spirit that is possessing this man is described as an *unclean* spirit. Not an *evil* spirit or a *demonic* spirit. Our reading next week is going to talk about Jesus casting out *demonic* spirits, and there is a totally different word that gets used for that. The word here is the Greek word *akatharto*, which means *ritually* unclean. So this man had a spirit that was considered unclean according to Jewish law. We don't know *exactly* what that means, but one thing it *does* mean is that he should not have *been* in the synagogue. If you were unclean, you could not participate in Jewish religious life until you were declared *clean*. You were *separated* from the community.

Who *determined* what made someone ritually unclean? The Jewish religious leaders like the scribes. They said, “Here is what scripture says about it, and here is what rabbis have traditionally said about it.” The scribes had the authority and power to declare someone unclean and separate them from the life of the community. *Jesus'* authority and power is not just to

declare something unclean but to *cast it out* and *bring about healing*. Not to *separate* people from one another, but to bring them back together and restore the community.

And *that* is the power of Christ that compels *us*. *That* is the authority that *we* are under. In the midst of a viciously polarized and divided world, *not* to use the name and power of Christ to further polarize and divide people (as some are doing), but to bring them back together and restore community. To cast out the unclean spirits that are keeping us from living in wholeness with one another and to bring about healing.

If the power of Christ compels us, then we must live in ways that resist the temptation to power in this world – power that serves to breed suspicion and a lack of trust and division; the power that declares those who are *different* to be *threats* or *enemies*. If the power of Christ compels us, then we must work for the healing of the world in the name of Jesus; the casting out of that which divides us. We do this because we trust that Christ rules and reigns over heaven and earth and can deliver us from all that which plagues us. *That* is the power of Christ that compels us.