

February 1 2015

Scripture Lessons ~

Psalm 111

Isaiah 40:21-31

Mark 1:21-28

Sermon *Confronting Our Personal Demons*

The opening verses of Mark's Gospel, I think, today serve as a kind of prelude to the entire ministry of Jesus. We follow along through the lectionary readings and we see Jesus baptized, first of all by his cousin John, and then he gets led into the wilderness for his test in the desert, and we'll take a look at that during Lent, and then he returns to his first disciples, which we talked about last week. With that, I think the preparations have been made and the prelude to Jesus' work begins. In this next story, which Sandy shared with us this morning, the ministry of Jesus begins in earnest in a synagogue in Capernaum. We see Jesus take the first step for helping us to, sort of, take off life's demons. I believe in this story we see much of the course of Jesus ministry in a single episode. As we consider this episode in Capernaum, we discover, I think, two truths which are unmistakably clear about Jesus.

First of all, the story teaches us that Jesus embraces everything in this world that is good and walks with us in our encounters with the hurts, the mistakes, and with injustices of life. We sometimes try to fool ourselves in believing if we look the other way long enough our problems will go away by themselves. Now you and I know it might work with snow. If you don't want to shovel your walk or your driveway you can wait until spring for it melt. You don't have to shovel. Just ignore it long enough and eventually, in a couple of months, it will go away by itself. But snow is just about the only kind of problem that works that way.

It would be far easier if Jesus could get on with his teaching and ignore all the difficulties, the addictions, and evils that are loose in the world around us. But Jesus can't do it. In the story the demons burst in the synagogue right in the middle of his sermon. Maybe the demon didn't like the sermon, I don't know, but for the most part it appears that he does so because the demon can't ignore Jesus either. He can't ignore the threat that has moved into his neighborhood. And the demon cries, "What do you have to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth", literally translated, "What do we have in common?" And the answer, of course, is that the demon and Jesus have nothing whatsoever in common. There is no common ground. Jesus has come to stand up to the powers which conflict and torment humankind.

And the second truth which the story makes clear is this; not only does Jesus stand with us when we wrestle with those demons in life that we may encounter, but he will give us the means to win the match against them. The demon doesn't have a chance against the love of God and Jesus although he gives it his best shot. It was believed, in fact, in that day if you know the name of the demon then you could more easily cast that demon out. To know a person's name would some measure of power over that person, and it works for God too, or so the ancient people believed. So the demon tries to take the imitative, trying to make short work of this foe "I know you," he screams. "Jesus of Nazareth and I know what you are, you are the Holy one of God " By naming him, I declare true hidden identity, the demon hoped somehow to master Jesus.

But Jesus' reaction is interesting. Jesus dismisses him in the way we would brush off a fly. "Be Quiet" Jesus comments to him or literally be muzzled, as if the demon were nothing more than some annoying dog. "Come out of that man," says Jesus, and the unclean spirit departs from him defeated and the possessed man is free, and the congregation marveled at the authority of Jesus' authority in teaching, but also in authority in banishing evil from the man's life.

By now, of course, you might be echoing the words of the demon himself, asking what in the world does this have to do with me. After all, we are enlightening people, and we live in an enlightened age, and we left demons behind us, or at least we think we have. I have wrestled in my belief about how evil operates in this world for my whole life. But anyway that you slice it, it sounds like the way some of us are destroyed by alcoholism or drug abuse. It sounds like the way that some of us are corrupted by greed or consumed by fears worries or possessed by that ongoing hunger that we have for success in the world.

In spite of our satellites and surgical lasers we haven't come that far from the first century in a lot of different ways. We are still as haunted and driven and crippled by forces which overwhelm and consume us as were the people in Jesus' day. If you want to talk about it in terms of tails and pitch forks or sociological trends or and sociological issues, the end result remains the same. If a demon is defined as something which comes within us and steals away our joy, and steals away our hope, steals away our strength. If the demon is some inner failing that turns our lives into a kind of burden or kind of trial, then I am afraid our world is literally smothered in demons.

The thing that we have to remember is that Jesus has the power to drive those demons out, and that is the whole message from the story in Mark's Gospel. Name your personal demon; maybe it is fear, maybe it is doubt, maybe resentment, maybe it is anger. Jesus is able to that confront those things that conflict us from within and give us the tools that we need to drive them out. Those who follow

Jesus can have a peace without bitterness, cast out fear, cast out hatred, cast out every other poisoned fruit that afflicts humanity, and in that void fill it with love.

You know as well as I do, that I am not preaching a quick and easy instant and painless deliverance from any of these things. Our Christian faith has nothing in common with those frozen dinners that you pop into the oven and 30 minutes later you have a three course meal with no more effort than pulling back the tinfoil off the top, and it is even easier faster with the microwave. I use it all the time.

Our Christian faith doesn't work that way at all. The story in Mark's Gospel suggests that much to us, in the story that poor man ended up screeching and he rolled on the floor in compulsions before he managed to take off that demon. Sometimes it can be painful to shake off our personal demons as well.

For example in Matthew 10 the rich young ruler came to Jesus and said, "You know I have kept the law. I go to church every Sunday, I pray, and I read my Bible. What else do I have to do to have real life?" And Jesus as much as said, "You are on the right track, but there is just one demon that you have to cast out. You love your money too much. Give away everything that you have and come and follow me."

And the rich young ruler said, "No thanks, I'd like to hang on to that demon if you don't mind", and he went away with a very long and sad face.

Then I saw a cartoon in a magazine a few years ago, and it stuck with me because it seems so typical, a woman sitting on an examining table in the doctor's office. She is pale, she's drawn, she's sickly and she says to the doctor, "What can I do to feel better without giving up the things that are making me feel so bad?"

Unless we truly want to change, there is no point in asking God to cast out those demons that all of us intend to hang on to. It is not easy to change ourselves. It is not easy to change our lives because it takes patience; it takes commitment; it takes faith; it takes a willingness to keep on trying no matter what happens. Even with Jesus on our side it may take more than one try to cast out those personal demons. But easy or not, with Jesus, we can take on life's demons. You know the people who left the synagogue that day, they told everybody about the things that they had seen. The news about Jesus spread all throughout Galilee. And the news is still spreading among those who long to be free of those personal demons, and the news is still spreading among those who believe in God's power to change their very lives, and the news is spreading that Jesus had come and God's love and those demons are running scared.