

Jesus and the Demons  
Based on Mark 1: 21-28  
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Mark's gospel is presumably written first of the four gospels, so Mark would have been maybe the first full telling of the story of Jesus' ministry. And within Mark, the first miracle that happens, the first time Jesus shows his God-given power, is when he uses it to rid a man of his unclean spirit—it's an exorcism.

As will become normal in the rest of the gospel, this unclean spirit immediately recognizes Jesus. First the spirit recognizes him as Jesus of Nazareth. So it knows Jesus' name; it knows where Jesus comes from. Then the spirit recognizes him as "the holy one of God." And is appropriately defensive and afraid. "What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us?" It feels like the spirit's words should be in all caps. As though it's shouting, and talking fast, only stopped in its stream of words by Jesus' commanding him, "be silent and come out of him." Or, more loosely translated, "shut up and get out."

A very short story and a long list of questions. Not the least of which is: What is an unclean spirit? Was it the ancient understanding of mental illness or other conditions? Was it some kind of metaphor for things that take people over—the way that alcohol or opioids are sometimes talked about as a demon? Could it even have been a symbolic expression of the Roman occupation, the way that the Empire got under people's skin, took them over, made them work against their own interests? Probably all of the above and then some other stuff we just don't understand.

As far as the gospel of Mark goes, the most important thing we know about the demons is that they hurt people. They seem to make people hurt themselves—in one story an unclean spirit throws a child into fire or into water; in another the demon-possessed man bruises himself with stones. The unclean spirits hurt people, and as far as Jesus is concerned, they have to go. And they don't want to. They would prefer to stay right where they are. Like a bad habit, they are hard to dislodge, they have arguments and excuses and techniques to change the subject and take control of the conversation.

A friend of mine suffered from bulimia in her twenties. When she told a therapist about it, she explained, "I only do it when I'm depressed, it doesn't happen that

often, it's not as if I'm starving myself," rapid fire...until finally the therapist said, "Debbie, no one is going to take your bulimia away from you."

We get attached to these things that hurt us, they feel like part of who we are. Or as the ancient world thought of it, they possess us, with a mind of their own, until it's hard to *tell* who we are, apart from that habit.

Maybe that's why the unclean spirits in this gospel keep talking about how Jesus is the holy one, the son of the Most High God. Maybe they're trying to get him on their side, or just distract him from his task. But the point is that Jesus won't be distracted. "Wow," this particular unclean spirit says, "I know you! You're the holy one, sent from God!" To which Jesus answers, "shut up and come out of him."

It reminds me of my favorite line from that Elvis Costello song, "sometimes I wish that I could stop you from talking when I hear the silly things that you say." People being controlled by their addictions or their demons tend to say a lot in their own defense and most of it is what President Biden would politely call mularkey. Jesus wastes no good manners on the unclean spirits, telling them, as abruptly as Doc Martin, "stop talking."

On the one hand, he has no interest in hearing what the unclean spirit has to say—it's unlikely to be very illuminating. On the other hand, Jesus is blowing off the smokescreen of words that the demon is spewing, getting to the heart of what needs to happen in this moment—*get out*.

The thing about the exorcism stories that sucks me in every time is how miraculous they are. What I mean is, Jesus says, be gone, and the demons go. I'm right there with the people of Capernaum—he commands the unclean spirits! And they obey him! In a flash, the person is restored to their best and true self, clothed and in their right mind. That's what I call a miracle.

How many people have we known, how hard have we prayed for that kind of cure—to have people in the throes of depression, in the grip of addiction, in the chaos of psychosis, or the mists of dementia *returned to us* whole, beloved, in a single holy moment of healing.

The thing that gets to me about the exorcism stories is the very same thing that puts me off—because that's not how it happens here in my world. Getting rid of demons for us doesn't always happen at all and when it does, it tends to take work, patience, and time.

So there is a lot about the exorcisms of Jesus that I don't understand. But one thing that needs no interpretation is Jesus' insistence that the demons have to leave. He sees the person for who the person is—that's the fullness of Jesus' humanity responding to the full humanity of the afflicted. And he frees them from the forces that are distorting who they are—that's the power of God working through him.

We are not Jesus, and we do not have that power to free people from what traps them. But we do have the power to continue seeing the person for who they really are, to continue calling out to that person, to ignore the smokescreen and the nonsense, to insist in whatever way we can--those demons have to go.

Jesus does his exorcisms with words, only. He doesn't use holy water or, as a pastor of my childhood was known to do, coat the walls with salt in an effort to repel the demon. The unclean spirits are somehow overwhelmed by the power of the words Jesus says and the power of the fact that he cares to say them.

There was a point in the midst of Ahmet's crisis a few years ago, before he was getting the right medication, when he was about to be checked out of the hospital, and he made it clear to me that he wanted to go right back to the lifestyle that had contributed to the crisis in the first place. I protested, he resisted, the argument started escalating, I didn't see how it was going to end well at all, and I was wondering if maybe leaving the hospital wasn't such a good idea. And a social worker came in, just to wish him well as he was leaving. I summed up the argument for her, and she became a miracle, on the spot. She told Ahmet, "look, I understand this is who you were, but you're on a different path now. I hear you saying that was your identity," she said, "but I've only known you for a week or so, and I can clearly see, you are so much more than that." Those words of hers, and more importantly her willingness to make the effort and reach out and speak to what she saw was his true self, they turned the tide. He quoted them back to me a few days later; neither of us will ever forget that moment. And I hope I never underestimate the power of seeing another person, a child of God, and reflecting back to them what you see.

Andrew Solomon, the author of a memoir about depression, counsels those who are depressed that they should try to believe in good things, even when that belief seems impossible. "Listen to the people who love you," he says, "Reason with yourself when you have lost your reason." Because, he adds, "I believe that words are strong, that they can overwhelm what we fear when fear seems more awful than life is good." Words are strong. That's part of what we believe. The God we

find in the Bible gives words to the prophets, because words can make things happen. Jesus' words can find the child of God among the unclean spirits. The fact that Jesus bothers to speak to the guy who's acting crazy at the synagogue in Capernaum, much less the guy who lives among the tombs and the pigs in Gerasa, the fact that he reaches out to the person still in there, the person whose neighbors can only try to restrain or avoid him, the fact that Jesus has not given up on that person is huge. It's the condition for the miracle. Words are strong. Maybe not as strong as we wish they were sometimes. But maybe stronger than we know. Amen.