

Epiphany 4B - January 29, 2012, a sermon preached on the occasion of the Annual Parish Meeting, St. John's Episcopal Church, Harrison, Ark.

### **The Day a Demon Came to Church**

Mark 1:21-28

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER, AND OF THE SON, AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT.

Amen.

In the Gospel of St. Mark the opening verses serve as a kind of prelude to the ministry of Jesus. Looking at chapter 1, verses 1 through 11, we are told about Jesus' baptism by his cousin John. Then in verses 12 and 13 we see that he is led into the wilderness where he is tempted by Satan. In verses 14 through 20 he returns to Galilee and chooses the first of his disciples, Andrew and Peter and James and John. With that, the preparations have been made and the prelude ends.

Beginning with verse 21 which is the Gospel reading for today - the ministry of Jesus in St. Mark's Gospel actually begins. In the synagogue at Capernaum we see the first engagement in the war which Jesus has come to fight. In these verses we see the entirety of Jesus' ministry distilled into a single story. When we look at this story and the problem that confronts Jesus we discover two truths. First of all, the story teaches us that Jesus is the enemy of the powers of evil. This is warfare without surrender, without compromise, without treaty.

Sometimes we fool ourselves into believing that if we just look the other way long enough our problems will somehow go away on their own. Now that will work with snow. If you really don't want to shovel your walk or your driveway, you don't have to. Just ignore it long enough and it will go away — all by itself. But snow is just about the only problem where this works.

It would be nice if Jesus could just get on with his teaching and his ministry and ignore all the evil that exists in the world but he doesn't do that. In this story a man with a demon burst into the synagogue right in the middle of a sermon! Wouldn't it be wonderful if the ushers could just usher this guy back out and ignore him? But the demon in the guy cries out: "What

have **you** to do with **us**, Jesus of Nazareth?” Literally this might be translated: “What do we have in common?” The answer, of course, is that they have absolutely nothing in common. For the Kingdom of God — there is no common ground with evil. Jesus has come to do battle with the demons which afflict and torment human beings.

So number one: Jesus is the enemy of the powers of evil.

The second thing that this story teaches us is: Not only is Jesus at war with the powers of evil but he is also the unquestioned victor in that war.

Even though the demon takes the initiative to confront Jesus he doesn't have a chance. In that day it was believed that if you know a person's name you had some measure of power over that person. So the demon takes the initiative here. He tries to get the upper hand. He says: “I know you - Jesus! Jesus of Nazareth! And I know that you are the Holy One from God!”

By naming him, by declaring his true identity - the demon hopes to master Jesus. But Jesus dismisses him the way you'd brush off a bug. “Be silent! And come out of that man!” And with that, the unclean spirit came out of the man and departed - defeated.

The man who had been possessed is free and the entire congregation marveled at the authority that Jesus possessed - authority in teaching and even authority over demons.

So, how does this story apply to your life? To the life of this congregation? Perhaps you are echoing the words of the demon asking: “What does any of this have to do with me?” After all, we are enlightened folks in an enlightened age. We don't believe in demons in red suits carrying pitchforks. But do we believe that there is something diabolical that could get inside of us and tempt us to do things we shouldn't do? Do we believe that there could be some power within that could twist our thoughts and our actions until we begin to hurt others or ourselves?

Expressed in that way, doesn't it sound like the way some people are destroyed by alcoholism and drug abuse? Doesn't it sound like the way some people are corrupted by lust?

Or driven by greed? Or possessed by hunger for power or success? Or consumed by fears and worries?

In spite of our satellites and surgical lasers and computers we really have not come all that far since the first century. We are still as haunted and driven and crippled by forces beyond our control as were the people in Jesus' day. Whether you want to talk about demons with pointy tails and pitchforks or whether you want to put it in terms of sociological trends and psychological predispositions the end result is pretty much the same. If a demon is some inner failing which turns our lives into a burden and a trial - if a demon is something within us which steals away our joy, and hope and strength then our world is literally covered up with demons!

The Good News is that Jesus Christ has the power today, just as he did when he was physically in our world, to drive away the demons! That is the whole message of this story in St. Mark's Gospel.

Name your own personal demon: fear, doubt, resentment, bitterness, anger, despair, discouragement.... Jesus Christ is able to confront those things that afflict us from within and he is able to drive them away. If you are in Christ he will give you a spirit of peace which casts out bitterness and fear and hatred and every other poison fruit from the Kingdom of Hell

Now I'm not preaching a quick and easy, instant, painless healing. God doesn't **usually** work that way. The story in Mark suggests as much. The poor man was rolling around on the floor in obvious pain - in convulsions - before the demon left him. Sometimes it can be painful to shake off our demons!

Remember the **rich young ruler** who came to Jesus and said: "I've kept the laws, I go to church, I pray and read the Bible. What else do I have to do to find real life?" Jesus said: "You're on the right track. There's just one demon you must cast out. You love money too much. Give away everything you have and come follow me." The rich young ruler said: "No thanks, I think I'll just hang on to that demon. I think I kind of like him. I'm used to him." And he went away with a long, sad face.

There's a wonderful cartoon that illustrates this point very nicely. A woman is sitting on the examining table in a doctor's office. She is pale, drawn and sickly. And she is saying to the doctor: "What can I do to feel better, without giving up the things that are making me feel bad?"

Unless we truly want to change there is no point in asking God to cast out those demons we intend to hang onto. It's not easy to change things about ourselves and our lives. It takes patience and commitment and faith. It takes a willingness to begin and to keep on trying. Even with Christ on your side it may take more than one try, but easy or not - with Christ - there is victory!

Today is the **Annual Parish Meeting for St. John's**. You will hear a summary of the events of the past year - perhaps one of the more significant years in your history. The history of a congregation is like the biography of a person. It has its ups and its downs. This past year obviously ranks as a down period with two unrelated events: the retirement of your rector and the closing of St. John's Day School - a Harrison institution of significant importance to the community.

As you begin this time of transition one could make a list of problem issues facing the congregation - most of which you are aware and few of which I am aware. But I want to point out to you **three important assets** that you have - which are obvious to me.

**No.1: You are blessed to have strong lay leadership** - on the vestry as well as in other areas - leaders who are faithful and competent and knowledgeable - leaders who will not be put off by difficult problems but who are problem-solvers.

**No.2: I sense a positive atmosphere in the congregation** which will help you gain momentum throughout the coming year as you intentionally put the past behind you and focus on where God is leading you **now!**

As you begin to think about and pray about where God is leading you as a congregation -  
you **may** need to make some changes;  
you **may** need to explore some new opportunities;  
you **may** need to do some things differently.

It's not **easy** to change things to which you have become accustomed. It's not **easy** to do something **difficult** or **sacrificial**. It takes **courage**

and **determination**

and **commitment**

and **faith**.

And most **importantly** it takes **patience**.

It takes a **willingness to begin** and to **keep on trying - persistence, perseverance**. Even with Christ on your side it may take more than one try, but easy or not - with Christ - there is **victory!** And that brings me to your third important asset.

Your **third and most important asset is Christ, who is the head of the Church**. He has a plan and a purpose for this congregation **now** as he has had from its founding. **Always be in prayer and open to his guidance**.

The people left the synagogue that day that "the demon came to church" and they told everyone what they had seen. The news about Jesus spread throughout Galilee.

As you follow **Christ as the head of St. John's** you will be **blessed** in the doing of his will and as you tell others they will come and the **Good News will spread throughout Boone County** that **God in Jesus Christ** has the **power** to change lives.

From that first evangelistic excitement in St. Mark's Gospel the news is still spreading by the likes of you and me that Jesus Christ has come and that the demons are being cast out!

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER, AND OF THE SON, AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT.  
Amen.