

“And so, it Begins”:
A Sermon for Trinity United Church (Nanaimo, B.C.)
for January 28th 2018 (Fourth Sunday after Epiphany)
by Foster Freed

Mark 1: 21-28

*“What have you to do with us,
Jesus of Nazareth?
Have you come to destroy us?”*

I want to begin, this morning...I want to begin by naming the fact that this is bound to be an uncomfortable episode for us: one that places before us a worldview radically different from the worldview to which most of us subscribe: in short a worldview in which an exorcism...

...let's be clear that this is no mere healing that Mark depicts this morning, but rather an exorcism...

...an exorcism grounded in a worldview with which very few United Church folk are at home. Let's name that discomfort...and in a short while explore that discomfort: but first please permit me to explain why this episode (whether or not we are at home with it) is a critical episode in what is widely regarded as the most ancient of the New Testament gospels: the Gospel According to Mark.

Think of it like this.

Mark's Gospel opens with a one sentence summary of the theme this compact book plans to explore, namely the good news of Jesus Christ...who Mark hastens to designate as “the Son of God”. As you can see: Mark is not one to beat around the bush. But then...then...following that one sentence introduction, Mark begins his story, and he does so quite methodically: first by locating Jesus (the hero of the story) within the movement of renewal begun by John the Baptist, next by narrating two preparatory steps Jesus takes as he readies himself for ministry, first undergoing John's baptism and then heading into the wilderness for a time of testing. Immediately following the completion of that preparatory ordeal, we're told that Jesus begins a ministry of proclamation, and that he then calls disciples—followers—to walk and work with him.

Incidentally: given how early in his ministry Jesus calls disciples, I am always puzzled by those who want to claim that he didn't have any intention to start a church. That has never rung true to me; if you call followers right from the get-go, you clearly are trying to start something: something that will have endurance beyond your own limits of fortitude and time. In the case of Jesus, why not call that something the church? But I digress!

What I suppose I am trying to suggest here, is that there is a very real sense in which this morning's reading presents us with the real starting place for Mark's depiction of Jesus' public ministry: a ministry to which Mark has so far alluded, to which Mark has

shown us Jesus preparing, but has yet to present with vivid illustrations. In short, this episode—taking place in the synagogue in the town of Capernaum in Galilee, not far from Nazareth—this episode in Mark truly deserves to be regarded as occupying the place of honour at the very head of Jesus' public ministry. And so it begins! And so it begins...not with a whimper, but with a remarkable demonstration of Jesus' power.

But yes: it's precisely here...precisely with that demonstration of power...that an attentive modern reader of Mark will realize that Toto: we're not in Kansas anymore. We have entered...we have entered the strange new world...the strange new world of the Bible.

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Then again...to be fair: the episode begins quite prosaically. At the outset the centre of attention draws us not toward Christ's deeds, but to his words. Having entered the synagogue in Capernaum, Jesus teaches...doing so with an authority so pronounced...

...an authority different than that of the teachers to whom they had grown accustomed...and to be truthful here...an authority dramatically different from any authority I would ever dare to claim...

...Jesus, even with his very words, strikes them as being in their midst with unparalleled authority. And yes: were the episode to end there, it would already represent a key claim being made about this Jesus. But, of course, it doesn't end with that. What comes next is the part I have described as an exorcism: involving a man in the synagogue being held captive by an "unclean spirit". That spirit cries out: "*What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us?*" And then—given the fact that this spirit, malign though it may be is most definitely a spirit—shouts out the recognition that in Jesus it has met no ordinary foe. "*I know who you are—the Holy One of God.*" And with that—possibly because that spirit knows more than Jesus wants to see shared with others—Jesus undertakes the cleansing, the exorcism. "*Be silent!*" "*Be silent...and come out of him.*" And with that...with that sharp command given, that stern word of power spoken, we're told that "*the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying out with a loud voice, came out of him.*" Mark adds that they were all amazed!; no doubt we too would have been amazed had we been present. But as those who were not present...and from the distance of 20 centuries...we ought not to hide the fact that this episode is likely to raise a number of questions for us, most of them circling around the sort of world-view this episode embodies, a world-view in which spirits (powers and principalities, many of them ill-intentioned) fill the world and seek to harm men and women of every conceivable sort. Is that the sort of world in which we wish to live? More to the point: is that the sort of world in which we **believe** ourselves to be living?

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Over the years...whenever I have found myself preaching or teaching around this dimension of the witness of the New Testament...

...and I hasten to add that the theme of malign spirits and the exorcism of such spirits is a classic New Testament theme, which is to say a theme that is more or less absent from the Old Testament...

...whenever I have found myself preaching or teaching texts such as this morning's, I suspect that I encounter three concerns with which thoughtful United Church folk tend to respond. The first, and in many ways, the most basic response involves a heartfelt: yuck! Trust me, I am no stranger to that "yuck", a gut-level response that is not all that different from the response I give anytime someone suggests that I view a "horror" film. I don't and I won't. A good drama, absolutely! A taut suspense thriller: I love them. But as soon as the supernatural comes into play...turning a thriller into a horror film, you can count me out. I don't want to live inside such a world even for the course of a two-hour cinematic experience. And so I have no problem identifying with those who simply don't want even to countenance the possibility that we were actually born into and find ourselves residents of such a world. Theirs is a concern I share!

Then again, I also share common ground with those who present what I like to refer to as the "Geraldine" objection. You all remember Flip Wilson—a very wise and funny man, may he rest in peace—whose comic character Geraldine kept many of us laughing. And yes: you'll recall her refrain whenever she did something inappropriate: "the devil made me do it!" Those who take personal responsibility with any measure of seriousness...

...and it is far from a distortion of the truth to claim that one of the distinguishing marks of the Gospel of Jesus Christ is that it most certainly does call us to **personal** responsibility!...

...those who take that call to responsibility with any degree of seriousness, tend to be sceptical of claims that malign outside agents are the ones responsible when we fail to do the things we ought to do, choosing instead the things we ought not to be doing. Surely maturity demands that we own up to our failures rather than claiming that the devil made us do it. That's a second issue folks tend to have with this whole area of the demonic and the exorcism of the demonic.

But it is the third concern—the third objection (and in many ways it is the most profound objection) that ought to be of special concern to us this day.

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I am referring...referring to the apparent disconnect between the New Testament picture of the world that confronts us this morning, and what modern science has taught us about the world in which we live. Rudolf Bultmann, the great German New Testament scholar who is perhaps best known for his desire to de-mythologize the New Testament, Bultmann famously wrote: "We cannot use electric lights and radios and, in the event of illness, avail ourselves of modern medical and clinical means and at the same time believe in the spirit and wonder world of the New Testament." Hence, Bultmann's desire to demythologize the New Testament: to separate its essential, timeless message about Jesus Christ, from a time-bound world-view that is no longer credible to modern women and men.

And it's right there, I'm afraid: right there, that I find myself torn in at least two very different directions. One of those directions involves a little bit of push-back to Bultmann: push-back that is perhaps best exemplified by the fact that the non-Biblical quote I have likely used in sermons more frequently than any other is the one that comes to us straight from the lips of Shakespeare's Hamlet: "there are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy...", words written by a playwright who could not help but be impacted by the birth of scientific method taking place at that very time, a birth especially identified with the name of Shakespeare's contemporary, Francis Bacon. Hamlet's protest against that sort of reductionism: his insistence to Horatio that there remain more things in heaven and earth, modern science notwithstanding, is a protest I cannot help but share. Go no further than the parade of horrors that littered the landscape of 20th century history (not that the 21st is off to any better of a start), history that unfolded against the backdrop of some of the most technologically and culturally sophisticated societies to ever walk this earth, who yet managed to produce barbarities of unparalleled horror. Surely...surely when the letter to the Ephesians cries out that *we do not wrestle against flesh and blood but against rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces in the heavenly places...*: surely what that letter is seeking to name, is the intuition we have all sometimes had, that there are indeed more things in heaven and earth than any of us can begin to imagine. And so yes, I want to push back against Bultmann just a wee bit...and yet!

At an earlier stage in my ministry, I think I saw it as my duty to argue people into the embrace of a particular worldview: what more conservative Christians will, in fact, sometimes refer to as the Christian worldview, the key accent being on the fact that this is not "a" worldview available to Christians but "the" worldview to which all Christians need to subscribe, if they are really and truly going to be full-blooded, card-carrying members of the in-crowd. And yes: it's a worldview in which radical evil remains a possibility, a worldview in which a healing ministry needs to be prepared for the possibility that it will encounter not only sickness but malign forces—let's call them by their proper name, demons—malign forces actively seeking to do harm. At the end of the day, none of that seems beyond my own experience of this checkered world we call our own...and yet hawking that worldview no longer feels like it is actually part of my job description. Because frankly...frankly...once I spend my time and energy trying to convince you that you have simply got to believe in the devil...well, suffice it to say, at

that point, I have things so upside down, so backward, that I am the one...I am the one who needs to step back, rub my eyes to part the shadows, and reopen them to see aright a Gospel that involves not the proclamation of the actuality of evil, but the proclamation...

...the **confident** proclamation of the one who came to **dispel** evil...to **conquer** evil for ever and a day. My job, you see, is not to dream up ingenious ways to make the world seem more terrifying than it actually is (and at times it can be plenty terrifying). Hell no! My job is to proclaim the advent of the One who came to scatter the terror and to banish our fears! The One who came—to answer that poignant question the demon shouts out—*what have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth?*—the One who came to us, none other than this Jesus, to set the prisoners free, whatever the prison in which they have come to find themselves. Which is to insist that that which began in a synagogue in ancient Capernaum will end with the surprising victory of a bloodied Cross and an empty tomb. And here's the bottom line.

Regardless of your worldview...regardless how you frame that fateful encounter at Capernaum, know this for certain: the healing, cleansing, renewing power of God has come to us in Jesus of Nazareth, has come to us in Jesus Christ....and the mission upon which he embarked was and always will be a mission of love. For each. For all.

May it be so! In Jesus' name!! Amen!