

MARK 1:21-28, JAN. 29, 2018 EXORCISM

Two Sundays ago we celebrated the Festival of the Baptism of our Lord. As part of that observance, we had an opportunity to renew our own baptism and faith through a rite that included renouncing evil, confessing our faith in the words of the Apostle's Creed, committing ourselves to living a Christian life, and then coming forward to have the sign of the cross made on our foreheads with water from the baptismal font.

Remember? The bulk of that rite, which we perform every year in January, is also found within two other rites of the Church: the service of Holy Baptism and the service of Affirmation of Baptism, also called confirmation. And I'm going to invite you to actually turn to page 235 in the front of your red hymnals to refresh your memories as to the renunciation portion of that service by reading it responsively with me, with you reading the words marked "response": Do you renounce the devil and all the forces that defy God? *I renounce them.* Do you renounce the power of this world that rebel against God? *I renounce them.* Do you renounce the ways of sin that draw you from God? *I renounce them.* Excellent. Thank you. And what have we just done? We have renounced evil. And whatever might that mean? And how does it relate to this strong but culturally foreign text which stands before us today in the Gospel of Mark, where Jesus exorcises an unclean spirit?

This renunciation of evil as part and parcel of the sacrament of Holy Baptism and of any renewal of Baptismal faith may date back as far as the earliest apostles themselves, about 2,000 years. To renounce, of course, means to reject, to resist, to condemn. This renunciation is a part of baptismal services within Catholicism, Orthodox Christianity, Anglicanism, Lutheranism, mainline Protestantism, Baptist churches, and Pentecostal

churches---which is to say, virtually every Christian denomination around the globe. In some denominations, particularly the Orthodox, this renunciation of evil is actually referred to as an exorcism. Did we all just participate in an exorcism? If so, where was the scary music, the special effects, and the cast of *The Exorcist* or some other such movie? And Jesus is in fact performing an exorcism in the Gospel lesson today---but it also lacks most of the big screen drama we have come to associate with a Hollywood version of exorcism. Nevertheless, it is a dramatic beginning to Christ's ministry and well worth our consideration; particularly as we apparently dabble in exorcism ourselves now and then.

Here then is a bit of information on exorcism, taken from the *Interpreters Dictionary of the Bible*, which is a reliable and scholarly source: "Exorcism is the practice of expelling evil spirits from persons or places by means of incantations and the performance of certain occult acts. In the ancient world, the evil spirits were believed to be the cause of all kind of calamities occurring in nature and the bearers of diseases and mental aberrations among people. Once such a spirit took possession of someone, it was the task of the priest to cast it out. The methods employed in exorcising evil spirits were primarily based on magic. The priest would fashion a likeness of the demon and then after the recitation of certain formulas, destroy it."

Consider our gospel text for today. Parts of it will be in line with that definition, and parts will not. Jesus teaches in the synagogue, surprising the listeners with his sense of authority. Teaching in Jesus day typically involved alluding to other recognized authorities to drive home one's own point, much as we often do today. Jesus did not allude to other recognized authorities; he taught as one who had authority enough

on his own. This surprised people. Apparently in the midst of his teaching, an interruption occurs. In verse 23 we read, “Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, and he cried out, “What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God.” There is no reason to suppose that the people at that service were any less astounded than we would be at such an interruption. I mean, there are a few members here who occasionally nudge each other or possibly make a comment, but nothing like what we hear described in our lesson. We would be utterly shocked if this happened here, and I imagine they were, too. However, they formed a different diagnosis of the situation than we might; it was presumed that this man was demon possessed, that he had an unclean spirit. Jesus deals with the man immediately, calmly and authoritatively. He says, “Be silent, and come out of him!” And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him. Pretty impressive. And folks are impressed. They marvel at Christ’s authority in his teaching and his exorcising and his fame begins to quickly spread through the area.

You may have noticed a significant thing in how Jesus responds—he doesn’t follow proper exorcist protocol does he? He makes no image of the unclean spirit. He goes through no elaborate ritual. He doesn’t destroy the image and say magic words. He just speaks, and the unclean spirit obeys. Just as Christ’s teaching differed from that of other teachers, so his exorcism differs from that of other exorcists. In each case, He is His own authority and His word alone brings about the needed change.

Certainly one of the points of this amazing story is that God’s word does what it says. In the first chapter of Genesis, God speaks creation into being. In the 1st chapter of the Gospel of John, Christ is identified as that Word which God spoke to bring creation

into being. The Word creates in Genesis 1, and here, in the Gospel of Mark, the Word in Christ has authority to teach and to cast out evil, however we understand that concept.

We discover here something about the power and authority of Christ; He is the incarnate God, wielding that power and authority through his word alone.

We also discover something even better than that; we discover that the powerful and authoritative Christ is allying Himself *with us*. Already in this first chapter of Mark, the battle between Christ and Satan, between good and evil, has been joined. Jesus sides with *us*. Jesus takes our side in the battle between us and death, evil, and disease. What could be better news than that? The battle is only beginning here in Mark 1—it will continue in encounters between Jesus versus Satan, Jesus versus demonic powers, Jesus versus disease and hatred and grief, right up until the crucifixion. That's how Mark frames his Gospel; as a battle between Jesus and evil. That's why Luther, writing 1500 years later in his Small Catechism, tells us that in Baptism, God forgives sin, delivers from death and the devil, and gives salvation. Luther, too, perceived life as battle between God and Satan, between humanity versus death, sin, and the devil. He, too, believed that Christ takes up that battle on our behalf.

Perhaps, then, we need to assess whether or not we actually experience our lives as battle, as warfare. It may not be the first metaphor that comes to our minds, but I'm guessing that at times, most of us do experience life as a battle, a war, a struggle. We may even say that we feel besieged. We experience our reality as consisting of one bad thing after another coming our way. We lose our job, our spouse gets sick, our car breaks down, our dog runs away, you name it. How often do we marvel at how troubles come in clusters—according to folk wisdom---troubles come in threes. But regardless of the

number, I'm sure we've all had those times of one dang thing after another coming our way, knocking the wind out of us, bringing us down, testing our faith. We have felt besieged. We may feel besieged by other people, people who are, or at least seem to be, our enemies, in terms of wishing us ill. These people may be within our own families or distant authorities who have some power over us, but they seem to be looking to bring us down. And it's not just people who seem to be adversaries. We fight all kinds of battles. Struggling with addiction is absolutely like warfare. The alcohol, or whatever the drug of choice is, is your best friend and your worst enemy. Addiction takes no prisoners over the long haul, and generally leads to death one way or another over time. Disease, too, can be an enemy for us. A friend with cancer told me how she knew full well who her enemy was: it was the cancer that was destroying her body. Circumstances that pile up negatively for us can be enemies, economic factors, even the weather. When mudslides, earthquakes or wildfires destroy your home, natural forces must surely seem to be an enemy.

Now, are all these battles, all these enemies, agents of Satan? I don't know. Certainly, our world involves a degree of randomness as an aftermath of the Fall where bad things just sometimes happen, just because they do. Much of the misfortune that befalls us probably comes under that category. Sometimes, too, we help our own misfortunes along through behavior or choices that make us vulnerable to attack. And maybe sometimes we are confronting evil in some form and are involved in a kind of warfare. These may be questions we cannot fully answer. But, what we can know is that whatever the cause of the battle or the origin of the enemies, Christ is on our side,

fighting for us, willing good for us, allying himself with us. And that's good news. That's gospel.

Years back, I remember a time when I was feeling rather besieged and was facing a particularly dreaded experience. A friend of mind told me, "I'm going to pray that God will fight all the battles for you ahead of time, so that you just need to show up to do your part." I had never thought of life or prayer in quite that way and was at first rather taken aback by her statement. But since then, I've come to deeply appreciate that sentiment. Sometimes there are battles, and sometimes they are battles that only God can fight for us. We can't defeat death on our own. We can delay it maybe, but we can't defeat it. We can't free ourselves from sin on our own, any more than an addict can quit their addiction without turning for spiritual help. Lots of the biggest things in our lives are out of our hands, but they are not out of God's hands. God's hands are exactly where they are, in fact. Which doesn't mean that we can pray for healing and expect that God will make our cancer go away. But, it does mean, that God is on our side, joining forces with us in our struggles, and that God has already won for us the war that really counts: we are delivered from death, sin, and the devil. Typically, we think of Christ as our Savior, or our Shepherd, but in this sense, Christ is our *exorcist*; he looks to fight these battles against evil, against all that robs us of life, for us and with us.

But, are we also, in some way, shape, or form, exorcists? As the Orthodox church might suggest by the wording of its baptismal ritual, which I referenced earlier? Do we, as followers of Jesus, who so courageously takes on evil, also have a calling to take on evil? To renounce it? To resist it? To name it and condemn it? To exorcise it, however that might be? It sounds like an intimidating task, doesn't it? But God doesn't give us a

spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, love, and self-discipline, as St. Paul reminds us in 2nd Timothy. . And it may seem like we've come an awfully long way within just a month's time from the beauty, peace, and "all is calm, all is bright" of Christmas Eve and Day to following Jesus in resisting evil on January 28. But think on this quote from civil rights leader, Howard Thurman: "When the song of the angels is stilled, when the star in the sky is gone, when the kings and princes are home, when the shepherds are back with their flocks, the work of Christmas begins:

to find the lost, to heal the broken, to feed the hungry, to release the prisoner, to rebuild the nations, to bring peace among the people, to make music in the heart. "

Every life giving, community building action we take, within these walls, and certainly outside of them, is a renunciation of evil, an exorcising of demonic power. Baby sitting your grandchild, volunteering at the food shelf, shoveling your neighbor's walk, contributing to the Super Bowl for the Hungry, having the audacity to worship the God of Light in a dark world on Sunday morning, photographing wildlife of amazing beauty, giving your best to your work—whatever your work might be,---all of these acts affirm life and goodness of God and renounce evil.. This is our calling, as we follow Jesus. Amen.