

**Sermon: Exorcise Routine 2****Scripture: Mark 1:21-28****Preacher: Rev. Will Burhans****Date: January 28, 2018**

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Sarah Marino, our illustrious and hard working office manager, totally got me this week. She always does a great job of designing our weekly email in a thematic way based upon the season or the scripture of the coming Sunday. I mentioned that this week's passage from Mark was one where Jesus exorcises an unclean spirit from the synagogue. And then on Thursday morning I see the church's weekly email come into my inbox and per usual I open it up and there for the top picture is this big hideous image of a demon-possessed girl with a scarred black and blue crumpled face, black eyes and an evil rotten-tooth smile! I swear, my heart dropped into my stomach as I envisioned that image going out to all 350 of our email recipients telling them about worship this Sunday! Then I saw in very little type at the top of the email a little note from Sarah... "In an alternate universe, I would send this email, hehehehe." I told her she about gave me a heat attack!

But in fact as you just heard Mike read, the exorcising of an unclean spirit is exactly what we face on this lovely Sunday morning. The Gospel of Mark, the first written of the 4 gospels, has no beautiful birth story beginning, no starry night, no shepherds in the fields or wise men bearing gifts to open the scene, but rather Mark begins his gospel by going right for the jugular. There's the wild man John out in the wilderness preaching crazy about the Messiah's coming and the need for repentance, the baptism of Jesus who's immediately is driven into the desert to confront Satan and comes back to call his first disciples

before heading right into the sanctuary in Capernaum, one of the sacred centers of the Jewish world, to confront an unclean spirit in that place which is exorcized with shrieking and convulsing, angering the scribal authorities who begin to make plans for his arrest and execution... and welcome to the story of Jesus we say out of breath and practically panicked!

Biblical scholars have debated about the almost urgent nature of Mark's Gospel, as though he's trying to get it all out as succinctly and quickly as he can because the authorities are comin' knocking on his door and the disciples have to decide what to do next. In fact all the earliest manuscripts of the Gospel of Mark end in a similar panic where disciples see an empty tomb and turn and run away – listen to the response at the resurrection - "trembling and bewildered the women went out and fled from the tomb. They said nothing to anyone because they were terrified!" Mark begins with some terrifying images of Satan and unclean spirits and furious authorities and ends with a state execution, an empty grave and terrified disciples freaked out and running away! The soundtrack to the gospel of Mark would need composers more like Metallica or Nine Inch Nails rather than Handel or Bach. Jesus in the sanctuary with an unclean spirit, "What do you want with us Jesus?" duhndhunddhundhudn!

So an exorcism, eh? We shouldn't get side-tracked on images of demonic heads spinning around and spitting pea soup, because there's actually something much more at stake than that here. And we shouldn't limit this to a simple healing story either because it's much bigger than that, otherwise the religious authorities would not care

what Jesus was up to. And they do care. They care a lot! So to understand more fully what Mark is saying in this story of exorcism, it'll help to jump to the end of the story for a moment where at Jesus' death you'll remember it flashes to the temple and says "and the curtain in the temple was torn in two from top to bottom." Remember that? That is a key moment for unfurling the meaning of Jesus according to the Gospel for Mark.

For you see in the Jewish mindset of the day there had been this fencing in of God, this border wall building around the divine, so that heaven and earth, the sacred and the profane were delineated as separate spheres of the holy and unholy, the pure and impure. The sacred was here in the holy of holies and engaged by priestly sacrifice and protected by religious laws and strictly defined by scribal regulations and everything outside of that was profane. This was a distortion of the original revelation and the truth of the matter. And so what happens through Jesus' crucifixion and death – the Jewish followers of Christ would claim – is a penetrating of the barrier between the sacred and profane, between heaven and earth. The curtain was torn in two and right then and there the divine and earthly conjoined once again!

And in fact all of Jesus' ministry and teaching works to do the same thing, to break through the illusion of separation of these realms – the kingdom of God is not some future reality but within us and among us now! So back to chapter 1, Jesus walks into the synagogue, a separate and sacred space of the Jewish world, closely linked to the temple at the time and sacrificial practices and hierarchical authority structure and he

doesn't ordain and respect the space as sacrosanct – which is what the scribes and Sadducees would have assumed the Messiah would have done – but he, the Holy One of God, walked into that place of holiness and confronts an unclean spirit there. And we the listeners say “What a minute, what??!” Jesus does what in that sacred place? In one of his first public acts according to the Gospel of Mark, like turning the tables that he would do later on, he confronts corruption, evil, in the sanctuary. By half way through the first chapter, things have gone all topsy-turvey – the corrupt found in the places of purity and the pure in places of unclean and that strict dividing line obscured.

In many ways Mark IS in fact saying the same thing as a manger bed and dirty shepherds and foreign wise men and an unwed pregnant teenager. God is not just in the temple and the holy city of Jerusalem, God is in these terribly mundane and profane places. It's just that Mark makes the point from the opposite side by saying “And where you thought God was revealed exclusively, in those sacred and holy places, that's often where you'll find the unclean, that's where you have the lust for power, that's where idolatry can reside as much as anywhere!” And that's why the authorities were so spitting mad and began making plans to eliminate him.

And forever more there can be no claim to exclusive access to God. No longer is God housed in building or temple or holy land and controlled by the authorities therein but the true nature of God being in and through all is revealed and particular places of holiness, temples of God are erected wherever Christ-like love and compassion, mercy and self-sacrifice are offered – in the temple of community, on the altar of

the human heart; that's where heaven meets earth and earth meets heaven. That's where the true temple resides and the true church – not in brick and mortar but within and among us where the Spirit of Christ is enfleshed and given breath and space to work.

After Jesus does his exorcise routine in the first chapter, he runs over to Simon Peter's house and heals his mother in-law and many others and drives out more unclean spirits in other places. But even in the wild and crazy of Mark's first chapter, it eventually draws to close with a beautiful moment where it says "very early in the morning, while it was still dark Jesus got up..." and with the pace of the Gospel thus far you might imagine that he's going to be off somewhere to get some exercise - run 10 miles or something but then it continues, "very early in the morning, while it was still dark Jesus got up and went to a solitary place, where he prayed."

And there too is the temple of God, there is the sanctuary of the Lord, the locale of sacred, the merging of heaven and earth – in silence and stillness and prayer. Not a place dictated by the authorities or delineated by religious regulations, nor a place where some are welcome and others excluded, nor a place walled up on private land that requires membership and dues but simply a solitary place wherever the noise recedes and the distractions diminish and the discord lessened so that we can better tune into the hidden interior presence of God who is everywhere even within our own souls and our own communities...

**Lord prepare me, to be a sanctuary, pure and holy, tried and true.  
And with thanksgiving, I'll be a living, sanctuary for You.**