



“What is This?”

Sunday, January 31, 2021

Mark 1:21-28

A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Christopher W. Keating  
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*Jesus Christ comes to us and demonstrates God's authority by disrupting the forces that keep us from being whole persons,*

The other day someone said something to me along the lines of this:

“I really liked how you talked about faith. I’m not religious, but I liked what you said.”

She’s hardly alone, of course. Survey after survey reminds us of the growing numbers of people in our world who describe themselves as *spiritual* but not *religious*. Another significant number of folks are described by researchers as “de-churched.” Some 65 million of them have quietly left the churches they once attended, with about half of them saying they have given up on church but not on God.

My good friend Patrick Vaughn has written about his own experiences with the so-called “dones” in a book he called “Meeting Jesus at Starbucks.”<sup>1</sup> He wonders what we might learn if we would spend more time with these folks who have left our churches. Patrick asks, “How might we find new excitement and energy for sharing the good news?”

Let’s start by telling stories of where God shows up. Let’s start by reminding ourselves of the times when we were broken, and how a slender thread of grace helped us bind our wounds. In other words, let’s tell stories of demons that were cast aside, and times when the chaos within us was calmed simply because God showed up.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.amazon.com/Meeting-Jesus-Starbucks-Those-Church/dp/1723990299>

When I hear people tell me they are not religious, my first thought is to say, “If you’re not religious, you might really like our church!” But then I started to think that maybe some of the people who were around Jesus might have said the same thing about him. Jesus was routinely criticized by the religious people of his day. He pushed back against religious traditions in ways that were not popular. He extended God’s compassion. He showed up without judgment and offered grace.

Many people wondered if Jesus was really religious.

That’s not completely true, of course: Mark reminds us that Jesus’ ministry gets its kick start when he drops by a synagogue on the sabbath. Each of the Gospels offers a different look at Jesus’ first public acts of ministry. In Matthew, Jesus preaches the sermon on the mount. In Luke, he is the guest preacher at his home synagogue in Nazareth that lands him in a pile of trouble. In John, he turns water into wine, which is why nine out of ten Presbyterians say John’s Gospel is their favorite!

Mark tells us that Jesus has gathered a group of followers, and then enters a synagogue. Yet he does not come to learn, but instead picks up a scroll and starts teaching. People may have wondered, “Who invited him, anyway? And who are all these strangers he’s brought with him?” Across the synagogue, the chair of the morning hospitality committee suddenly wonders if she brought enough snacks. Over in the back, the head of the finance team has looked at the kind of folks who have been travelling with Jesus. “Fishermen,” he thinks. “Well there goes any hope of a big offering today!”

Across the synagogue, people murmur and whisper. They are astonished by his teaching, but also worried about sort of people Jesus has attracted. In particular, they are worried about the guy who just walked through the back door.

He’s not one of them. He’s not part of us. He’s not like them at all. In fact, he’s unclean. In high school terms, this guy was not a popular kid. Even worse, he has an unclean spirit—he has demons and should be left alone.

The real world has just intruded into the sacred and solemn place where people have gathered to find God.

And guess what happens? God shows up. Jesus comes, amazing those gathered with his astounding authority. He restores the man’s broken life.

Jesus’ first act of ministry in the Gospel of Mark is an exorcism, which really does make the water into wine thing sound a whole lot more appealing!

But the Gospel is good news where you'd least like to find it: an unclean man confronting the Son of God during Sabbath services. The good news that Mark wants us to hear is not a healing, nor a miraculous production of wine, or even a sermon, but the casting out of a demon.

Mark, in fact, seems to be particularly interested in demons and exorcisms. Of the 13 miracles in Mark, four of them are stories of exorcisms. Mark is indeed telling us about Jesus the boundary crossing Messiah, the God who dares to cross from the side of the respectable and predictable and offer peace and calm to those held in the grip of chaos.

Later today I'm going to be a guest on Steve Taylor's podcast "Blue" which can be found on the Wildwood Matters website. Steve and his cohost will be interviewing me about the experience of faith during the pandemic. I doubt very much that they will ask me if I have been conducting exorcisms -- which is good since that class was not offered at Princeton. Exorcisms conjure up images of Linda Blair spiraling out of control, spinning around and spewing forth all sorts of evil. For others it may bring back memories of dealing with overtired two year-olds or even adolescents throwing tantrums. All of that is to suggest that when a nice, respectable gray-haired Presbyterian mentions exorcisms on Sundays we wonder if we've come to the wrong church.

Yet many of us have come to see these pandemic days as a sort of demonic existence that has separated us from the communities we love. And while I am not interested in performing a Linda Blair-esque exorcism, I do believe that the promise of God that Jesus offered to the man plagued by demons is the promise offered to us.

We do not know what the people of Jesus' time meant when they spoke of demons. The descriptions of convulsing and flailing around leads some to wonder if those who were called "demonics" were instead people with illnesses like epilepsy. Others wonder if this was a catchall term for persons with serious mental or behavioral health issues. My wife worked at a home for elderly schizophrenic patients. She came home one day, and when I asked how her day was said, "I was the only one in the room who didn't think they were Jesus Christ." Or perhaps they really were possessed by demons.

In any case, when we are gripped by demons we are ripped from the communities of grace where God dwells. Like the man in the synagogue, we are seen as outsiders, incomplete persons who do not deserve to be standing inside the boundaries of God's community.

Yet it is at this moment, in this place, that God shows up. As the chaos inside the man rages, Jesus demonstrates God's authority by offering healing and peace.

We know where the unclean spirits live in our lives: the untamed struggles, the deep, unhealed parts of our soul. We know where the unclean spirits live in our world: the hurts, the prejudice, the intolerance. The demons we could name rage around us: homophobia, me-first individualism, domestic violence, fear of others, fast-to-the-punch judgmentalism, and even at times, religious faith bent toward hatred and not the God of love.

These demons are threatened by the presence of Jesus. These are the demons that rage out of control, and yell at him, "What do you have to do with us?"

And he answers: I come to bring peace. I come to offer healing. I come that you may be well.

In his book "Meeting God at Starbucks," my friend Patrick introduces us to a woman named Sue. Many of us have known women like Sue, and perhaps a few of us have lived her story, too. Patrick writes:

When I met Sue, she was weary of churches and with good reason. When she and her husband divorced two decades earlier, the pastor and the congregation responded by shaming her and blaming her. Sue was the reason the marriage fell apart. It was her fault.

She was looking for healing and acceptance; instead, additional wounds were cut more deeply into her heart. She walked away from the church, and did not darken the door of a congregation for twenty years.

Sue wanted, even needed grace. She received judgment.

I still marvel at her courage in worshipping with us one Sunday morning. The previous evening she had driven by our church, and she noticed our small, incredibly difficult to read sign at the intersection. She couldn't make out the words, and so, incredibly, she drove around the block to view the sign again. She saw that one of the worship services begins at 10:00am.

The next morning she sat in a pew and worshipped with us. The following Sunday she did the same. And the following Sunday. And the following Sunday.

I'm sure the congregation was warm and friendly, but I suspect something deeper and much more simple was at play. For the first time in a long time, she could sit with a congregation and not feel judged, singled out, shunned, and beaten down.

She could sing the hymns and pray and enjoy the choir and listen to the sermon in a safe place.

Patrick concludes, "Don't we all yearn for such a safe place?"

He's right – it is in those safe places where Jesus will show up. Be amazed at what God will do. Amen.