

Highland Presbyterian Church
4th Sunday after Epiphany – January 28, 2024
A sermon by Megan McCarty

Deuteronomy 18:15-20

Mark 1:21-28

To me, Mark's gospel can sometimes sound like it was written by my five year old. Not necessarily in the language used or even the writing style, it's more about the pace in which it was written. Most stories start with the Greek word that we usually see translated as "immediately." Jesus is baptized and then *immediately* driven out into the wilderness. Jesus calls the disciples and they *immediately* drop their nets and follow him. *Immediately* there was a man with an unclean spirit in the synagogue and *immediately* Jesus's fame began to spread. Jesus heals a leper and *immediately* the man is made clean. And that's just in the first chapter.

Now if you have a five year old or have ever been around one, you know that when they tell you a story it's packed full of action and adventure, things happen quickly and they just keep happening. It's like one massive run-on sentence because they are so excited to get it all out at once. That's Mark's gospel.

Mark's Gospel is not for the disengaged spectator; because also, much like a story being told by a five year old, if you stop listening for a second you have lost the plot because the story is sixteen steps forward from where you were when you got distracted. I know I'm making light of it now, but Mark's gospel, at its heart, is a very serious book because it's written for those who are caught up in an apocalyptic struggle. They are living in this in-between time where they were told by Jesus that he would return, but he never told them when and so they think any day that Jesus could reappear, that any day could be their last day on this earth. You can almost feel this pressure and anxiety and excitement building in the book of Mark.

So, for all these reasons, this Capernaum synagogue exorcism scene that we just read, is not one that can easily be turned into something manageable. You can't say that this story is just about being helpful to strangers in church. It also cannot be easily demythologized into some existential principle for individual living because when taken into context of the whole book, we recognize that it's so much more than any of this. Its cosmic, apocalyptic urgency about the coming reign of God.

Mark as narrator carries over this urgency indirectly by describing the synagogue exorcism scene with that same Greek word meaning "immediately." Like the disciples, we readers had best be ready to respond with some degree of shared urgency. In this startling scene, an unnamed man with an unclean spirit speaks first. The fact that the possessed man speaks of himself in the plural— "us"—only amplifies his cry: "What do you have to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth?" Then the man with the unclean spirit seems to recognize Jesus' eschatological purpose of destroying evil, as well as his identity as "the Holy One of God." For this, Jesus rebukes and silences him, which is typical of exorcisms, but especially pointed here, given the fact that Mark's Jesus is constantly telling people not to tell anyone who he is. The

“we” of this demonic host obeys, but not without convulsions and cries proportionate with such a corporate, embodied struggle.

Jesus’ success then further underlines the authority attributed to his teaching: not just authority as competency or entitlement, but the actual power to bring about the end times. The point of such an early exorcism scene in Mark’s Gospel is not to provide information. It signals the urgency of the coming apocalyptic struggle and invites readers into it. But what do we do with Mark’s apocalyptic struggle when the things that threaten our world are not so much demons and ripped-open heavens, but regular old broken or demonic systems of our own human construction?

New Testament scholar Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza offers some help in her work on the apocalyptic rhetoric of *Revelation*. She argues that the theo-ethical rhetoric of the Apocalypse creates within us a response of “steadfast resistance.” Now Mark was likely written at an earlier time, and in a different place, than Revelation. So, we need to use her insight about Revelation with some discernment. That said, her notion of steadfast resistance as the purpose or motivation of Revelation’s rhetoric can help to take us out of the realm of symbolic speculation to a focus on the practical and the struggles we face from our varied positions of power in light of the coming reign of God. Mark’s gospel preaches of a God capable of sustaining steadfast, embodied resistance.

Apocalyptic rhetoric is not about escape, but about naming the world, its pain, and its promise aright. Mark never lets his readers forget that all of Jesus’ eschatological vision and apocalyptic miracles need to be understood considering the cross. Mark’s cross, of course, is not just another way of talking about substitutionary atonement. It is a way of calling things what they really are.

This very apocalyptic gospel of God is also the gospel of Jesus Christ. And who Jesus is matters for the way in which we would practice steadfast, embodied resistance to the demonic. This Jesus is not boastful or bragging, but silences demons when they speak of his identity. He is, from the beginning of his ministry in Galilee, self-effacing even as his reputation grows. We do not need to establish Jesus’ dominance through exorcism but rather note his self-awareness throughout the Gospel of Mark that he is on his own steadfast way to the cross. For it is the dying, crucified Jesus in Mark for whom the sun grows dark, for whom the curtain of the temple is ripped open, and whom even a centurion proclaims, “the Son of God.”

This little exorcistic scene from Mark, set in a synagogue on the Sabbath, is a sign of God’s reign for us. It is, moreover, spoken by a Jesus who wants nothing to do with dominance, schemes, or good publicity. He aims with urgency to enlist his disciples, and anyone else with ears to hear, in their own local practice of apocalyptic struggle. Steadfast, embodied resistance to the demonic... That’s a lot of big words for simply saying that we should always try to do the next right thing and speak truth to power.

In your bulletins you'll see an insert that talks about the work we have done over the last year through the Church in the World committee. We decided almost a decade ago that no matter what our budget was, 10% of it would go to direct benevolences. And we have held to it. Even in years where we have passed a deficit budget. It's built into the core of who we are at Highland Pres. Which means that last year, we gave direct benevolences back to this community in the amount of \$159,300. You can see the organizations that we supported this year on that insert. But there's a lot on that insert that doesn't have to do with benevolences.

There's lots of organizations that we support with our time: our volunteer power or serving on the board of different organizations like Kentucky Refugee Ministries, Highlands Community Ministries, Portland Avenue Community Trust, or Cabbage Patch. There are other organizations that we serve with our talents like STITCH, We of the World, and Habitat for Humanity. This is embodied resistance. It's stepping up and saying we are not ok with the systems in our community that widen the gap between the rich and poor and don't take care of the marginalized, the widows and orphans.

And this is just what our church is doing in the world. Most of you are involved in different organizations in this community and around the world. How we embody resistance to what is negative in this world matters. There's a lot of good work happening here. But the Church in the World team is only made up of seven of you and often it's the same individuals that serve at all the different volunteer opportunities. Now, this is not meant to shame you or make you feel guilty. I fully recognize that we all lead full lives. But the question remains: how will you embody resistance today? Or every day?

We don't live with the same apocalyptic urgency that Mark's gospel eludes. But we do encounter demonic evils of the world every day. It's up to us to figure out how to respond. The good news is that we don't have to do it blindly. Jesus has shown us how to do this through his humility, his self-awareness, his ability to speak truth to power and call out evil when it is present, and in the end, his selflessness. Following Jesus's example will help each of us fulfill our call to embodied resistance. Today. And every day, what will you do to resist? Amen.