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As those gathered in Capernaum exclaimed at the end of today’s story, “what is this?” In the book of Mark this is Jesus’ very first act of authority following his baptism. In Matthew, he preaches the sermon on the mount. In John, he turned water into wine at a wedding. That Jesus is way more fun! What is this indeed! Centuries later, we wonder at this story. What is this? We could choose to rationalize it, citing mental illness and historical context. Which may very well be true. We could choose to dismiss it, uncomfortable with its content. Which is a valid concern. We could choose to abuse it, using the text to hammer fear into others. Which I do not recommend. Or we can choose to join the crowd that day and wonder at this story in amazement of the authority of God when Jesus showed up among them. What is this?

Nothing like preaching on exorcism from the back of a pick-up truck in Georgia. But here we are gathered on our sabbath day in the closest thing we can get to the inside of the sanctuary. Does this sound familiar to anyone? “They went to Capernaum; and when the sabbath came, Jesus entered the synagogue and taught.” Watch out y’all.

Like us, the disciples and congregation head to their local place of worship on their sabbath. Like us, they are there because they want to worship and learn about God and connect with their community. Like us, they would listen to the stories of their faith, pray, sing, and listen to leaders interpret and reflect on the text.

In the synagogue that day, Jesus came to teach. As a Christian Educator, I would LOVE to know what he was saying-because even before there was an inkling of the impending miracle, those gathered were taken by his teaching, “for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes.” Perhaps he was expounding upon his sermon from a few verses earlier, “The kingdom of God has come near-Repent and believe God’s good news!” His teaching style and method must have been incredible.

However, he was doing it. There is something about Jesus that commands and exudes authority that is unlike anything they’ve seen-no hard feelings to the scribes, who like your pastors at PHPC, depended on the historical writings, education, and wisdom gleaned from experience. What Jesus taught and how he taught it was simply astounding, because it came from God.

Everyone in the synagogue recognizes this authority radiating from Jesus-including an uninvited guest, a certain “unclean spirit” residing in a man unnamed. Unclean spirit? What is this? Rather than thinking of this man as some random person who wandered in off the streets screaming, I imagine this man was already there. He was someone they knew. Someone they were sitting down the pew from. This “unclean spirit” was something within this man that stripped him of his own voice, self-control, dignity, and isolated him from his community. It was some evil impossible bondage that the man did not have any power over, right there all along, among the gathered community, in their sacred space of worship. Whatever this force of evil was had probably been there for awhile.

This story points us to the truth that on this sabbath day in this sacred space of worship, among our very selves, are “unclean spirits.” Possessing our voices, our self-control, our dignity, and our treasured sense of community are bondages that we struggle to free ourselves from. I believe this is certain. Not because I’ve seen anyone convulsing or screaming out in worship- if that were to happen, let me assure you that your pastors will call 911 long before we consider the exorcism route. And don’t worry, I’m not about to point any one person out as “the one” possessed by an unclean spirit. But I know myself and the powers that I struggle to contend with, and I don’t think I’m alone.

There are many unclean spirits in the “isms” of the world we can find in our midst: racism, sexism, ableism, ageism…you know the list. In the last year, one unclean spirit I’m guessing I’m not alone in experiencing is a certain brand of despair as we’ve faced a pandemic that has kept us isolated and unable to exercise the control we normally have over our own lives. I had a baby a year ago! I went on parental leave for and exhausting and wonderful 12 weeks, and when I came back to rejoin you, we were worshipping online and I was working from home. I want you all to snuggle and hold Annie Ruth almost as much as you want to hold and snuggle Annie-but we just can’t, and I hate it. I fear that life will not return to what it once was anytime soon, resigning myself to low expectations and cynical doubts. I don’t want people to know I feel this way much of the time, so I say I’m fine. And when this despair gets recognized, I tend to snarl a bit, sometimes defiant to hope.

When the “unclean spirit” in Mark faced the authority of the teaching of Jesus it recognized him right away. It cries out when it recognizes an authority more powerful than it’s own, seeking to get the better of this authoritative teacher, trying to pick a fight in hopes to gain even more power: “have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, Holy One of God.”

Now here’s the part where Jesus could have really shown his audience a good knock-down-drag-out. He could have retorted back, in front of all these eye-witnesses, “Yeah, that’s right, you know who I am! I AM Jesus Christ, Son of God, so you better watch yourself! You have NO IDEA who you’re dealing with!”

But this isn’t how Jesus deals with evil. Jesus doesn’t argue or posture. He doesn’t seek to correct or better. He does not engage in a power struggle. Jesus shows up. Jesus is direct. “Be silent and come out of him!” He silences the evil confronting him and sends it away, freeing the unnamed possessed man, liberating him, and reuniting him with what he had previously been separated from. What is this? It’s God showing how to walk the talk.

Authority in action starts with showing up. It is direct. It banishes evil. It liberates. It reunites. And it’s source is from God, and God alone.

Our Psalm today spoke of what this authority looks like:

**4**God has gained renown by wonderful deeds; the Lord is gracious and merciful. **5**God provides food for those who fear the Lord; God is ever mindful of his covenant. **6**God has shown God’s people the power of God’s works, in giving them the heritage of the nations. **7**The works of God’s hands are faithful and just; all God’s precepts are trustworthy. **8**They are established forever and ever, to be performed with faithfulness and uprightness. **9**God sent redemption to God’s people; he has commanded his covenant forever. Holy and awesome is God’s name.

Jesus puts these attributes into action-in this first exorcism, and in the stories of his healings, miracles, teachings, and his way of life. Jesus embodies everything the worshipers gathered had learned about God and more in how he showed up to teach and live with the authority of the Holy One of God.

Jesus sends evil packing, but it doesn’t go quietly. This scene in scripture is difficult to read and imagine. “The unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying out with a loud voice came out of him.” is certainly not what the congregation expected to happen when they gathered at the synagogue on the sabbath, like they do every week. Apparently unclean spirits don’t just fade away-they protest and trash the room and scream on their way out. But in surviving this violent departure, their community has been made a little bit more whole, and they have seen what it is to do this difficult work.

I sure am ready for this pandemic, and all the negative things we’ve experienced around it to be exorcised. And from what I’ve been witnessing lately in our country, and among my friends and family who have suffered from this illness, and honestly, with any trip I make to the store when I see people refusing to take basic safety measures, it’s going to go out with a struggle.

But I’m holding on to a shred of hope that when we survive its dramatic departure, our community will have been made a little bit more whole. That we will continue to ask “what is this?” as we look for God working in our midst.

“They were all amazed and they kept on asking one another, “what is this? A new teaching with authority!” Jesus’ teaching is astounding. The witnessed him underscoring that teaching with action, silencing evil and liberating a community member with no pretense or vanity. They were humbly reminded that they were not God, and that as humans who reside alongside “unclean spirits” they may not have even recognized, they needed guidance and a new authority.

Like us, they leave worship each week wondering what to do with what they heard-especially this day. Like us, they must decide if they will participate in God’s work.

What is this? In this particular story, Jesus doesn’t leave us with a call like he did when he called his first disciples to “become fishers of people.” He doesn’t say, “ok y’all-let’s go banish some demons!” He says nothing. He doesn’t respond, doesn’t try to clear anything up-the lesson has ended. This must be one of Jesus’ teaching strategies-leaving his students to try and process what the heck just happened.

So now it’s up to us to keep asking that question: what is this? When we find our hackles going up and a defensive voice rising within it, asking “what is this?” When we’re facing the powers that confine, isolate and strip away human dignity, asking, “what is this?” When we look down the pew…or parking lot…or e-mail prayer chain, and see someone in pain, scootching closer and asking, “what is this?”

And when we witness and participate in the powers that bind being silenced, and freedom being recovered, recognizing God’s authority that has shown up.

What is this? This is our call.

Amen.