

Mark 1:21-28

They went to Capernaum; and when the sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught. They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes. 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." But Jesus rebuked him, saying, "Be silent, and come out of him!" And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him. They were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, "What is this? A new teaching—with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him." At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.

"A Deliverance Greater Than Expected"

Dr. James Fowler is developmental psychologist and United Methodist layperson who has contributed a major body of study that gives us a means to talk about our faith development.¹ His six "stages of faith" provide a framework for looking at the spiritual growth of individuals and congregations. He states that between the ages of 18-30 most young adults choose to take responsibility, or not, for their faith commitments. This is an important step in moving to a discerning faith. It is only after this period of claiming responsibility that people of faith can begin to see that the scriptures do not provide black and white directives and answers. Then another journey of learning how to live in the knowledge that faith does not provide straightforward answers to our questions begins. At this point we can accept that God's truth often lies in that which shocks and shakes the formulas we'd like to contain God within. But standing in the midst of questions and learn trust is a risky place to be.

In today's reading from Mark, the gospel writer shows us a faith community who take responsibility for their faith commitments. But they do this from an understanding that the scriptures will provide an answer to the questions they bring. That was how interpretation was done in the synagogue. Although they were in awe of Jesus' authority that day who could be sure of what the "unclean spirit" was sure of? That Jesus is God. "What is this?" they wonder.

I recently read a fictional account of an older gentleman who taught and mentored a college student through a correspondence of letters during an academic year. In "Letters to a Young Doubter" William Sloan Coffin, a former university chaplain at Yale and minister of Riverside Church in New York City is the fictitious professor Bill who responds to letters from a young student Tom. On this journey Bill supports Tom sharing wisdom through dialogue. Bill shares pointers, not firm answers. He shares the reasoning and faith he has based his life on. This short novel made me reflect on the depth of maturity a spiritual guide and mentor must have to bear the questions, doubts and ego of a student who is a serious seeker.

Mark's gospel has already revealed to us that we are a privileged audience as readers. You could say we are the serious seekers he is writing for. We know things that those who witness Jesus' teachings and life don't. The narrator tells us in the first line we are reading, "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God." Assumes that we hear the prophetic voice linking this news to the Old Testament as John cries out in the wilderness—a messenger to prepare the way. None of this is explained, it is assumed knowledge. At the baptism of Jesus the Spirit descends and we hear what Jesus heard, "You are my Son, the beloved; with you I am well pleased." No one present hears this, just Jesus and us. Jesus' temptation shows that he is One who is different than us. We are told he could withstand temptations, even 40 days surrounded by wild beasts. None of the disciples are told about this experience later in Mark.

Mark's gospel has us experiencing Jesus from a privileged vantage point. This point of view will probably prove to be more of a challenge than we expect. We tend to believe that we know the gospel story. What could be new or shocking to us? Mark does what most great teachers do in his gospel. He provides pointers along the way for us, but rarely gives pat answers to satisfy our questions. Pointing to the gaps in what is revealed and what is known we are left to wonder and yearn to know more. We are expected to engage in this work of faith. As privileged insiders we are to ask ourselves the questions those in our text ponder, wondering what they may mean in our lives. Also, we look for the gaps in the gospel story.

We might ask what Jesus was teaching the people after entering the synagogue? Why doesn't Mark tell us what he said? Based on the people's reactions we know that Jesus' teaching sounded different

from the scribes' interpretations of the scriptures. They either shocked the hearers in horror or were awe-inspiring. Possibly it is a mix of both. Jesus' word most certainly challenged the normal mode of interpretation within the synagogue community to elicit this response.

Where in this passage does Jesus take us by surprise? If we aren't surprised, are we missing the point? As people of the Living Word we are to claim gospel paradox. Even though we know the good news we should be shocked when confronted by it. It is so different from our desired way of living. Just like the people in the synagogue, at least according to Mark's gospel, we should have more questions than answers when we encounter God in Jesus our Christ. In fact, it's biblical to have questions upon catching a glimpse of the "Holy One of God." God does not fit into any spiritual, social or economic system we have devised throughout time. The strangeness of God cannot be tamed. Who is this? What is this? Where does his authority come from? This passage is like a question and answer session that is missing the answer section!

An "unclean spirit" cried out acknowledging Jesus as the "Holy One of God" when the four disciples following Jesus had no clue who he was yet. The "unclean spirit" had taken over the man. The man was mute, taken over and possessed. Jesus won't stand for it. Creation was restored on the Sabbath! The day of rest and renewal actually became one for the man as the unclean spirit was forced to leave him. The people in the synagogue heard and saw this and began to understand themselves in a different way.

Our place of worship is to be a place where we come with all our burdens, fears, hate and prejudices and acknowledge that God is with us and that God can transform us just as Jesus did by making the unclean spirit leave the man. The leaving of the unclean spirit is like what happens to a person suffering from an addiction when they receive treatment. Be it sexual addictions, drugs, alcoholism or gambling, by silencing the voices that bind our being God brings new life to us as individuals and as a community of faith. In Jesus' actions in this text we see the way things should and will be in the future for all. For God has drawn near to humanity in Jesus to show us that God wills us all good things.

For Jesus' "fame to begin to spread throughout the surrounding region" the people in that synagogue must have gone out and shared what had happen as they experienced Jesus of Nazareth. They must have told the story of how those who are bound, those that cannot even speak, can be set free by Jesus of Nazareth who has power over demons. If those who do not see Jesus as the triune God can proclaim such hope how much more can we, the insiders to the faith, proclaim knowing the good news of Jesus Christ? We can proclaim to one another and to the world that God will release those that are held captive. That God knows suffering as we do now.

Who is Jesus? The "Holy One of God" who came with the authority to offer a deliverance greater than expected to all. Even one who is bound by the powers and principalities of this world, completely controlled by outside forces, can be unbound by this good news. Praise be to God. Amen.

ⁱ He is the Director of the Center for Faith Development at Emory University. His book is *Stages of Faith* (Harper & Row, 1981).