

**4th Sunday, Year B, January 29, 2021**

**Deuteronomy 18:15-20; Psalm 111; 1 Corinthians 8:1-13; Mark 1:21-28**

**Jesus's Authority over Chaos**

This year during the church year's ordinary time, the Gospels are from Mark. Last week we heard Mark's introduction of Jesus in a passage that is a capsule summary of the whole Gospel. Jesus arrives in Galilee proclaiming the "good news of God"-- God's reign of care for the people is at the doorstep. Our passage today gives an account of the very first day of Jesus' public ministry. Jesus is presented teaching and then as driving an "unclean spirit" out of an unfortunate person. I'd like to reflect with you about what exorcism of this demon could possibly mean for us. I will suggest that what the people of Jesus's day saw as an "evil spirit" we can see as the force of chaos in our lives. What Jesus does on the first day of his ministry is a promise that Jesus can overcome all the chaos that threatens our own lives and our lives together in society. A big promise!

When we read a story like today's passage from Mark, we're tempted to dismiss it because, well, who really believes in "unclean or evil spirits" today? Perhaps, way down deep, we do fear them a little bit, or Hollywood couldn't so profitably make an occasional movie about exorcism. But most of us think that we should get over mistaking epileptic seizures or some tragic forms of mental illness for demon possession. So we're not sure what to think when Mark literally begins

his story of who Jesus is and what Jesus should mean for us with a story of Jesus expelling an "unclean spirit" from a person.

One of the ways Mark describes the exorcism might help us. We hear that when Jesus approached the man with an unclean spirit, the spirit cried out, "What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us?" Mark tells us that Jesus then rebuked the spirit and said, "Quiet! Come out of him!" The work rebuked is very important for understanding the story.

"Rebuke" is the very same word that we hear in the story of creation as it is recounted in the book of Job. As you remember, Job is facing numerous forms of suffering. Members of his family have been killed in what could have been a tornado. His own body has become diseased. The life of his community has been turned upside down by numerous disasters. You could say that chaos has the upper hand. When his friends suggest to him that he just give up and despair, Job forcefully reminds them that at the very beginning of all things, at the time of creation, God brought forth from chaos the good earth and the men and women whose lives are "very good." Job tells his friends when God spoke his word of creation, by "his thunderous rebuke he stilled Sea, by his skill he crushed Rahab." In creating, God rebukes the sea and the evil sea monster Rahab who lives in it.

One of the ways the bible portrays creation is as drawing of the good earth out of chaos. The Chaos of a wild, stormy sea, inhabited by ferocious sea

monsters, is a regular biblical image for what existed before God created the good earth. Israel names one of these sea monsters Rahab. When threatened by chaos and suffering, Job tells his friends: I will not despair. In creating the world and in creating me, God rebuked the sea of chaos. I will trust in God, who will again rebuke chaos and bring forth a life that is “very good” for me and my world.

The same thing happens in today’s gospel. Jesus rebukes the force of demonic chaos that threatens the man in the synagogue. As God rebuked the sea of chaos and crushed the demonic monster Rahab at the dawn of creation, Jesus rebukes the evil spirit—the chaos—that like Rahab threatens the man in the synagogue, restoring him to a life that is good, very good.

It should not be surprising that the people in Capernaum were “astounded” and that Jesus would speak in a way they believed only God the creator could speak. Nor should it surprise us that Mark begins his telling of the good news about Jesus with this story. It is surely good news for anyone who has shared Job’s experience of chaos, suffering and death. That includes all of us. God will again speak a creative word to overcome this chaos, and will restore us to lives that are good, very good. That is good news indeed. Let’s pray together that even when chaos seems to have the upper hand, we, like Job, can keep alive our hope that God will rebuke chaos, recreating the good life we have been promised.