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**St. Barnabas' Episcopal Church – Florissant, MO**  
**Fourth Sunday after Epiphany, January 31, 2021**  
**Mark 1:21-28**

“They were astounded at his teaching.”

“They were amazed, and they kept on asking one another, ‘What is this?’”

The Epiphany of Jesus in the gospels, the unveiling of his identity, is complex and each gospel uses a different lens. The evangelists were artists more than they were historians. They were more interested in telling a good story, painting a picture of Jesus, than they were of getting the facts right. It’s a gift that we have 4 gospels, 4 lenses that give us a full epiphany of who Jesus is.

In each of the gospels the first events give us insight into the larger theme of the gospel. They tell us something about the distinct understanding of Jesus’ mission and character for each evangelist and his community. In Matthew, Jesus is a teacher and a new lawgiver – the new Moses. In Luke, he is the one who releases captives and heals the sick and proclaims good news to the poor. In John, the first thing Jesus does is to bless and multiply the wine at Cana – he comes to proclaim the abundance of grace upon grace that is God.

In Mark’s gospel that we hear today, the first thing Jesus does is pick a fight with an unclean spirit! Mark’s gospel starts with a confrontation. His story is the unveiling of Jesus as the one who came to oppose the forces of evil.

Now we post-modern Episcopalians are pretty uncomfortable with the notion of evil. We read about “unclean spirits” and we want to explain that as a mental health crisis or a metaphor or anything but the notion of possession. The language of evil and unclean spirits is foreign to us.

But if we understand the forces of evil as anything and everything that robs God's children of the abundant life God promises, then we can't help but acknowledge that evil is unleashed all around us. Just open a newspaper – hunger, gun violence, domestic abuse, addictions, racism, the list goes on. We may be uncomfortable with the notion of an “unclean spirit” and yet we know that unclean spirits abound.

And this is what Jesus came to oppose – all the forces that rob us of life in God. The demons knew that. They knew he was after them. If we side-step the issue of evil, if we only understand Jesus as a nice, moral teacher then we whitewash the gospel. Jesus as an exorcist, the one who drives out evil in and around and among us, is an important part of the epiphany of the kingdom of God.

The exorcism Jesus performed was very different from what anyone had seen before. There were no incantations or rituals, there were only his simple words spoken with authority, “Be silent, and come out of him!” Jesus' mission was so clear, his authority was so direct that he simply spoke and the demons departed. His power astonished the crowd, but his words of exorcism weren't said for the sheer power of the act. They were said to liberate this man from what possessed him, from whatever it was that was dominating him and binding him up. Jesus the exorcist is Jesus the liberator.

There were presumably lots of other people in the synagogue that day. Good, rule-following, prayerful folks. It must have been frightening, maybe embarrassing for the folks who witnessed this man with the demon. It had to be unsettling for sure. But Jesus didn't worry about making the congregation comfortable, he didn't kick the man out or tell him to get it together and then they could talk. Jesus met him where he was and reached out to heal him. The first thing Mark tells us about Jesus is that he came to vanquish evil, brokenness, all the forces that are

opposed to love. All the forces that are opposed to God. Jesus came to confront all the forces that harm God's people and keep each of us from becoming the beloved ones that God created. Jesus chose to manifest the power of God's liberating love in the plight of a man possessed by an unclean spirit.

If we are honest, we will all admit that there are things that possess us, that bind us up and keep us from being fully free. Some of us struggle with addictions. Addiction to alcohol or drugs, addiction to our smart phones, our social media, to food, to grudges that we might not even remember the origin of. We often keep doing things that we know are not good for us but we can't let go of them. Some of us struggle with fears and anxieties that keep us from living fully and freely. We all have moments and histories of prejudice and judgement. What is it this morning that each of us needs liberating from? Jesus doesn't stay away from these places; He is drawn to them. Jesus came to set us free, to release us from whatever it is that binds us. I would encourage you this week to invite him into the areas of your life that are hard and full of fear or hatred or resentment. We only have to show up and to listen to his voice – the voice that drowns out the unclean spirits within us and fills us with the love of God.

As we experience that liberating, life-giving love, we are able to ask, "What does our community, our neighborhood need liberating from?" Where are we being called, as followers of Christ, to confront evil, to shed light on systems and practices and customs and day-to-day dealings that bind others up and keep them from being all that God desires? The love of Christ and the love we share in Christ is sometimes a confrontational love, a love that requires us to stand up and say, "Be silent, and come out."

The good people in the synagogue were astounded at those words as Jesus uttered them. The words were spoken with such authority and their impact was astonishing. What made him so

different? What made his teaching so powerful? Maybe it was that, instead of just imparting information, Jesus was effecting transformation. What is it in your life that needs to be transformed so that God's love may permeate your every cell? What is it in your corner of the world that needs to be confronted as evil, as contrary to God's reign of love and mercy and compassion? Let us pray that we may follow in the steps of Jesus, the one who came to confront evil. May we allow him to set us free from whatever binds us that we may be agents of transforming love in our corner of the world.