

## **Anything But Normal**

### **A Sermon for Every Sunday, Epiphany 4b**

#### **Mark 1:21-28**

Those who gathered thought it was going to be an ordinary day in the Capernaum synagogue.

There would be prayers and reading of the sacred scriptures.

Someone, usually one of the scribes, would offer commentary on those texts. That person would offer an interpretation of how they should live in light of those texts. As they gathered that day at the synagogue, the normal conversations happened. How are you? How was your week? What's new at work? How's your mother doing? What's new with the kids and grandkids? Did you catch the game last night? In other words, everything was going along just as usual. Predictable, settling out to the law of averages, you know, as worship goes.

Then things got started and when the time came for the reading and the teaching of the scriptures, a stranger stood up. And he began to teach. When he began to teach, there was a weightiness to what he was saying – the words he spoke hung around in the air like they were thick with meaning. He taught the worshippers with authority, with power that they were not accustomed to hearing. This was anything but average. He made the Scriptures come alive in a way they had not encountered before. He made the texts make sense, and most of all, they struck to the heart and the core of their being. The way he taught changed the way they saw the world, how they saw themselves, how they thought about God, and most importantly changed how they wanted to live. His teaching unsettled and unseated their preconceived notions and lifted them up. This man taught with power and authority!

It certainly would have been enough to have had this experience. This man's teaching was enough to provoke a change and respect among those in the synagogue. They wanted to hear more. But they still had no idea who he was...where he came from...under whom he had trained to learn so much about the scriptures. Who was this teacher? Where did his authority come from? Someone took their bulletin and scribbled a note on it to the person next to them "Who IS this guy?"

Those questions floated up in the people's minds about this man as he stopped speaking and moved to resume his place among the congregation. And just then there was a disturbance...a commotion in the back of the synagogue. A man approached. He spoke up. What he said was not what everyone else was thinking. "What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, you are the Holy One of God." This was more of a challenge than it was an actual question. The worshippers were shocked and stunned in silence. The teacher stood back up and confronted the man with a spirit. He commanded it to come out of him...and...it did. The crowd moved from shocked silence to bewildered buzzing, grabbing their questions back from out of the air, and asking each other, "Who is this that teaches with such power? He even has power over the spirits, and they obey him!"

Here is a man, inside the synagogue, who brought a demon, an evil spirit with him to worship. Here is a man, Jesus, the powerful new teacher who not only teaches in an extraordinary way, but he heals this man, unseating and unsettling what had power over people. Here is a crowd who got a whole lot more than they bargained for.

Like the synagogue worshipers, we are prepared for a lot that goes on each week when we gather. We expect to pray and to hear the scriptures read and interpreted. We expect that even on occasion, when worship is really good, the one who interprets the text in worship might do so like he or she has some authority and maybe even some power. We might even expect, from time to time, to have our emotions stirred.

But I'd venture a guess that we do not expect the kind of wildcard moment that happened in the synagogue that day so long ago. Somewhere along the line in the history of Christian worship we got the idea that worship should be tame...that worship (and by extension, church itself) is for people who have it all together or who at least can put on the appearance.

Nowadays, you better not even let your cell phone go off in worship or keep yourself unmuted or make a typo in the chat, much less bring an unclean spirit with you. And I cannot substantiate this claim, but I've heard that worship can be so tame, so predictable that someone might just be able to sleep right through it! Somewhere along the line we decided to button things up, to close it off, to make worship respectable, predictable. In all of that, we have placed the lion's share of our emphasis, in some way, on reproducing the first act that Jesus performs in the synagogue: teaching and explaining the Scriptures for better understanding. We choose enlightenment over exorcism. Illumination over transformation.

The American author Annie Dillard talks about worship in many churches in her book *Teaching a Stone to Talk*. Maybe you've heard it before. She asks: "Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort

of power we so blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. It is madness to wear ladies' straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping god may wake someday and take offense, or the waking god may draw us out to where we can never return."

I like the way Dillard paints this picture. She confirms that many of us have made a choice in our worship patterns and practices and how we approach worship as individuals. Enlightenment over exorcism. Illumination over transformation. By and large, we have constructed worship to play out in ways that get us to the law of averages. Keep expectations low, such that if God were to show up and pull off something like the Capernaum synagogue healing, we'd be struck speechless. We carefully manage our distance with Jesus in our daily lives and on Sundays. And perhaps that's precisely because we know what happens in the Capernaum synagogue. We know that if we are to get close enough to Jesus and raise our voices, something in us might just become unseated and unsettled. Set loose and set free. Enlightenment and exorcism. Illumination and transformation. These belong together.

And yet, many of us sit, like the man in the synagogue, desperately in need of freedom and transformation. Don't get me wrong. I would not say that any of us are possessed by unclean spirits. But we are confronted by things in our lives that we cannot seem to control, things that have power over us and rob us of fullness of life. Things that destroy our chances to flourish. Things that cut off our desire to have meaningful relationships with God and with

other people. We are held motionless by fears and self-doubt and self-hatred. We are consumed by our anger and grudge-holding. We are grasped by our racism and our selfishness. There are situations and habits and relationships that keep us tossing and turning at nights. Wounds new and old that don't seem to heal. We are weighed down by more than we can bear at times.

The hymn writer Tom Troeger in his hymn "Silence, Frenzied, Unclean Spirit," says this: "Lord, the demons still are thriving in the gray cells of the mind: tyrant voices, shrill and driving, twisted thoughts that grip and bind, doubts that stir the heart to panic, fears distorting reason's sight, guilt that makes our loving frantic, dreams that cloud the soul with fright." Yes, we may not call them that, but the unclean spirits still hold us.

In all of our work to ensure that everything is in its right place, to make worship tame, or in the energy we expend putting on the right mask on Sunday mornings to assure everyone else that we're ok, we tend to forget a crucial truth. Jesus is not just here to enlighten and illuminate. He came to free us from what binds us...to transform our lives into the shape of God's realm. It may have slipped past us in the week-after-week routine of roughly 60 minutes on Sunday morning year after year after year, but our text this morning invites us to see that Jesus comes into our midst for so much more than our personal enlightenment and illumination.

Because freedom and transformation take place, wherever and however we gather as church, just as it did in the synagogue. Or at least they can. It is here that all that holds us might just be silenced and set loose. It may not be as dramatic or as sudden as it was then, and believe me that's fine. I love the words and actions and

quiet beauty of many worship services. Even as even-keeled as we might be, for centuries the people of God have leaned into acts of worship as spaces to find God's healing. Prayer and praise, bread and cup, sharing our concerns with one another, quiet spaces for silence, confessing our sins, hearing that God is gracious and forgiving, passing peace to one another, listening to the stories of faithful people in the Scriptures, interpreting them as best we can, feeling the cool waters of baptism...There are not just the Sunday morning motions. These are invitations for the freeing God to meet us wherever we might be, for the Holy One to look into our eyes and confront the spirits that bind us, saying to them with power and authority, "Be silent, and come out!"

Maybe you may have missed that voice lately, but it's here. Yes, worship is a place for enlightenment and illumination – that is a continuation of the way of Jesus. But this is also a place where the God of creation meets us, where the liberating Christ speaks a word of freedom to what binds us, and where the Spirit comes to transform us.

Welcome to worship, church. May today be anything but normal. In whatever space or mode or manner we find ourselves as we worship together, may God meet us here, set us free, and transform our lives.

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