

## **POSSESSED**

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

**Texts:** Deuteronomy 18:18-19; Mark 1:23-27

When we read stories we sometimes attach meanings to them without necessarily thinking about those connections. This first miracle story from the gospel of Mark may evoke one of two connections on our part.

One possible connection may come from the exorcism of the unclean spirit. For folks of my generation, we may think of the book and movie, The Exorcist. For younger folks, maybe the connection comes from The Last Exorcism or the more recent, The Rite. These movies depict truly eerie stuff along with gallons of pea soup; I know that when I saw The Exorcist, I suffered from nightmares and I did not want to be in dark places alone for a while.

The Exorcist is purportedly based on a real case. That information makes the movie even scarier because at the back of our minds, we wonder if something like that could happen to us. Add to the mix, the many books that have been written on demonic possessions including Scott Peck's The People of the Lie. So when we hear this story from the gospel of Mark, our visual imagination may go to those gross scenes from the movies we have seen and the books we have read.

Another possible connection we may make goes on a more scientific path. We may want to dismiss the idea of demonic possession and think in strict medical terms. Commentators on this story have suggested that the man may have been afflicted with epilepsy or some kind of psychotic break. A less technological society such as first century Israel would not have the language or the pharmacology to handle such medical problems.

But the problem with these approaches is that we attach meaning to the story from our cultural context and we may miss the meaning of the story for the gospel writer. The better question might be to ask why the gospel writer of Mark tells this story as the first miracle story. The gospel writer of Matthew has the cleansing of a leper and the gospel writer of John has turning water into wine as their first miracle stories. So the gospel writer of Mark has a unique opening and he wants us to learn something.

For this gospel writer, the world is a battleground between powers and principalities, seen and unseen. These powers often stand in opposition to God and God's creation. Out of that belief system arose a cosmology that understood that the forces of good battle against the forces of evil or chaos. Thanks to the influence of the Persians, the folklore and apocryphal story tellers believe that legions of angels battle against legions of demons; cities and nations are protected by these angels; there is a sense that these battles will come to a head someday and human beings are the territory to be captured.

All of the gospel writers (not only Mark) found this theme especially important. Outside the gospels there are scant references to demons while the gospels contain 63 references. Jesus, as the Son of God, is seen in competition with the powers and principalities that oppose God. For the gospel writers, Jesus stands in for God in restoring the order and goodness of God's creation.

For the gospel writer of Mark, these exorcism stories are also symbolic; that is, he sees the exorcism as something more than just a competition between Jesus and the spirit world. Many times, I think the gospel writer sees this cosmic battle as extending into worldly spheres and that Jesus becomes an agent of change against the status quo in religious circles and in the political sphere.

In the story we heard this morning, the gospel writer introduces an unusual setting for an exorcism. The demon is called an unclean spirit and I think the gospel writer uses that term on purpose. The exorcism takes place within a synagogue—a place where people gather who are supposed to be ritually pure. The synagogue revolves around hearing and learning about the Law that describes a purity code so that one may be in full relationship with God. Yet, for the gospel writer, into this place steps a person possessed by an unclean spirit—an event that should not be able to happen in the gospel writer’s worldview.

When the unclean spirit can enter a place that is supposed to be ritually clean, we begin to wonder: is the synagogue, the religious institution, as ritually pure as it is supposed to be. These questions grow even more relevant when the unclean spirit cries out, “What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us?” We may begin to wonder, how inclusive is the ‘us’ in those questions, especially in light of the revelation that Jesus’ teaching is of authority unlike those of the scribes.

We might begin to wonder if the gospel writer is actually making a larger comment on the religious institution of his day.

Such an idea might have validity when we realize that the gospel writer of Mark likes to compose his stories with the brackets of other stories. For instance this story begins with Jesus teaching with authority and ends with his authoritative teaching; in between this story is the exorcism.

This story composes the opening of a larger bracket where the gospel writer introduces the first week of Jesus ministry within the first three chapters of this gospel. The week opens with Jesus in the synagogue healing someone and will close with Jesus in a synagogue healing yet again.

The far larger bracket takes up the first thirteen chapters of Mark with Jesus facing growing opposition and conflict. This first miracle initiates the conflict because Jesus heals the man on the Sabbath—a cleansing in the synagogue. The conflict is brought to a head many chapters later when Jesus cleanses the Temple in Jerusalem.

So this simple healing story of exorcising a man of an unclean spirit seems to include the gospel writer’s understanding that Jesus does more than transform one man’s life. This healing also seems to be directed at the brokenness within the religious system; Jesus challenges the powers that be within the religious sphere with a new authority and teaching.

The gospel writer sees that the religious system has been corrupted by those in leadership grasping for greater power and control. Jesus becomes a challenge to that corruption of power with the authority he gains from God. Jesus is the transformation that the passage from Deuteronomy promises. Yet Jesus is something more—his authority is not simply dependent on the Mosaic pattern, he brings something new to transform the present unclean system.

The gospel writer presents this story so that we, his readers, may begin to question what systems have authority over us. He wants us to ask ourselves: to what or to who have we surrendered authority and how does that surrender possess us?

In this season where we are bombarded by people running for political office, I think this question is especially relevant. When we talk about people in leadership positions, we say that they have authority. We know that their authority may come from reference to the body of laws we have accepted, or to others we have empowered to enforce the laws, or even the power we give others to shame, embarrass, or even disgrace us. I find it interesting that we even use the language of possession when we step outside the bounds of what is expected. For instance, have you ever had a parent or friend (or maybe you have said this as a parent or friend), “What on earth ever possessed you to do that?!?”

Possession, we realize, is a surrender of self to someone else’s norms. We find ourselves possessed (or maybe we could say obsessed) by a need to dress like others in order to fit in, to buy things that others expect us to have, or to behave as expected by family or cultural expectations. Sometimes we find ourselves possessed by the need of others, or to the ideas of a group, or to a belief system. We may even begin to wonder if we possess things or if they possess us especially in the use of addictive substances.

These possessions can become destructive when we fail to self differentiate from the other. We lose the boundaries of self and somehow believe that the other controls what we are and what we must do. In those situations, we have truly lost touch with our own identities and perhaps we can realize that loss of self is demonic.

In the healing story we heard this morning we hear that authority comes from God’s creative transformation. Jesus transforms the person in the synagogue by restoring his true self. The ultimate authority for the gospel writer is God’s love and grace in Jesus—not the religious institution or as we will hear in later readings from the gospel, not the political sphere. When we surrender ourselves to human authorities and things, we discover destructive chaos.

Who or what possesses us? Where do we give up our very selves?

The gospel writer urges us to follow the Christ who transforms us in grace and life to our true selves.