Text: Mark 1:21-28

**Introduction**

I should put a disclaimer up front today. I’m going to be a little more speculative than I normally am or would allow myself to be. Normally, when I take the pulpit, this is not the place for airing uncertainty. It is the place to proclaim Christ and what he has done for us. And we will do that. It is just that even over the course of my time preaching, exorcism texts have sent me in different paths of meditation.

Let me start with a story around that movie – The Exorcist. The movie, and I believe the book, is written in Washington D.C., around Georgetown. If you go to Concordia Seminary in St. Louis, you eventually get informed that the case that inspired the book and movie actually took place in St. Louis. And that the family initially approached a Lutheran pastor. That Lutheran pastor went to the faculty of the Seminary. Their response and thought evidently were much like young Priest in the movie. Basically these things must be psychological because evil spirits don’t really exist. They visited. They prayed. They offered the sacrament. And strange things kept happening. At that time they advised calling the Roman Catholic diocese. They might still have some experience with these things.

The other interesting thing about that movie to me might be a generational response or a reaction to advancements in special effects. But The Exorcist to this day gets talked about as this incredibly scary film. I think I saw it sometime in my early teens – so the 1980s – and already then I just didn’t find it all the scary. Now a simple answer might have been simply that having seen A Nightmare on Elmstreet, projectile pea soup just didn’t rate. But when I heard the Concordia Seminary story I had a second thought. The Exorcist was the first bit of popular culture in a while that asserted the reality of actual evil. Sure, hillbillies were handling snakes, and missionaries would have stories, but these were poor benighted places. Evil in enlightened areas? Like the initial response of Concordia Seminary, such things didn’t happen. Being forced to consider that evil was real and not just psychological could be dramatically scarry. But encountering it 15 years later, which was a world less confident of progress and moral enlightenment, the idea the evil itself was real didn’t have to be breached. It was assumed. And hence much of the horror of The Exorcist – which was between the young Psychologist Priest and the Old Exorcist Priest – had been resolved. We’ll pick this thread up in a bit.

**Text**

Right now, there are three parts of the gospel lesson I want to highlight. The first part is the location and assertion of the unclean spirit. The location being the Synagogue on the Sabbath. In that Jewish context this place was the definition of Kosher – of ritual cleanliness. If you were not Kosher, you don’t enter the Synagogue. Everyone would have done the ritual washings. This was the gathering of the people of God to hear the things of God. And it is the midst of all that ritual cleanliness that the unclean spirit manifests itself. And what that unclean spirit claims or asks is somewhat astonishing. It recognizes Jesus as the Holy One of God. But more important it asks the Holy One, “What do you have to do with us?” The first easy way to hear that us would be the spirit and the possessed man. The second way would be to read into it the “legion” – the Spirit being multiple. But I don’t think that is the natural way to take the assertion.

You, Holy One, what are you doing here. The us is all those gathers, sinful humans and unclean spirits. What do you – Holy One – have to do with the unholy? And that unholy is not just the spirit, but all those kosher people.

And that unclean spirit is not exactly wrong. If we think we have justified ourselves, made ourselves clean, through performing some religions rites, then we are dramatically wrong. There is a reason confession is usually considered a requirement for reception of the sacrament. “Let us first consider our unworthiness and confess that we have sinned in thought, word and deed.” In our natural state we have more in common with the unclean spirit than with the Holy One of God.

**Christology**

But when Jesus is confronted with the Satanic claim – these people are mine – the us is demons and people with the One – Jesus – on the other side – when Jesus is confronted with that claim he does two things.

First, he commands the unclean Spirit to “be silent.” And then he tells the unclean spirit to “come out of him.”

Satan in the time of Job would come and go before the LORD throwing all kinds of slander at the people of God. But with the incarnation of Jesus Christ Satan is told to shut up – be silent. Satan’s slander of the people of God will no longer be heard. Jesus would say, “I saw Satan fall like lightning.” Satan and all his spirits have been cast out from the presence of God and can no longer claim you. Because Christ has claimed you. Jesus endured the temptation. He lived as one of us. He innocently suffered the cross for us. And in Christ, Satan has no claim on us. We cannot free ourselves from our sinful condition, but the infinite mercy of the Father has been given to all mankind in the Son. Satan can say nothing.

The second part – “come out” – is important as well. Because you have been claimed not to be your own, but to be the dwelling place of the Holy Spirit. In your baptism the unclean spirits have been driven out and the Holy Spirit given residence. God has not just silenced arguments over who owns us rightly. God has claimed us. These ones in these waters are made part of The Holy One. What do you – unlean Spirits – have to do with the Holy Ones claimed by the Spirit of God. Nothing. Come out of them.

**Moral**

The last bit of the text that I want to highlight is the action of the unclean spirit. “The unclean spirit left him, convulsing him and crying out in a loud voice.” How does sin so often leave us? When our sins are held before us, how do we often act?

Loudly yelling and with convulsions is probably not a bad description. Who the heck are you to say such things to me? If I can’t do it this way, I’m going to do it that way. I’m sure we all have at least one episode that sticks in our mind. How someone called us on our….well…on our odiferous piles. And we didn’t take it well. And years later we are still somewhat ashamed, because they were right.

Sin, uncleanness, often leaves convulsing and crying. But it leaves. It has no power in the face of Jesus who has clamed you. And if the Holy One has claimed you, put down the shame and forge ahead. The Holy Spirit will sanctify and keep us.

**Eschatological**

Now this is where I’m picking back up my speculation. Ethan asked me during the week as part of his High School theology class as question about AI and its use in the church. And that question melded into some of the other questions I’ve had recently.

Even today we read the gospel accounts of the unclean spirits talking and can go back and forth between taking it as something that really happened and taking it as those Concordia Seminary high enlightenment types would have as mythic truth. But I want to think for a second about the ancient idols – that’s what Paul is talking about in the Epistle lesson and I expanded a bit in the pastor’s corner. And especially what they called the oracles. The most famous one was the Oracle at Delphi, but there were all kinds of places you could go and consult the spirits, consult the oracles. And they supposedly really talked. Paul elsewhere will say that the idols were backed by demons.

And there is a curious philosophical dialog written by Plutarch – a 1st century historian and philosopher – called The Cessation of the Oracles. In that late first century, the Oracles when silent. One by one they stopped speaking at all. And Plutarch is trying to come up with an answer. These places have been religious sites for centuries if not millenia, why did they just stop? His fundamental answer was that there were just not as many people who needed them. You can tell by that it was strange. It’s the pagan parallel mystery to the Jewish story in the Talmud about picking the Azazel stone on Yom Kippur every year from 30 AD until the temple’s destruction. They sit there uncomfortably without explanation.

Without explanation other than “Be silent!”

And the Oracles and Idols and everything that might have hid the unlean spirits have been silent.

But there is a warning in John’s vision in Revelation 13:15, “[the 2nd beast] was allowed to give breath to the image of the beast, so that the image of the beast might even speak (Rev. 13:15 ESV).” It gives me pause how easy it is to make an image that speaks today. And how much different would some type of idol or oracle powered by a tuned ChatGPT be from the Oracles speaking again? And how would we tell the difference between “nothing but complex code” and “unclean spirits?”

**Conclusion**

Speculation. Speculation thought which should return us to two places. Prayer that we might not be deceived. And confidence that our victory is already hidden in Christ. Satan can’t accuse us before the throne. All he can do is attempt to confuse and trick us. For which we have been given the Word and the indwelling spirit to discern. If they begin speaking and saying something different, like Paul if even he or an angel appeared preaching a different gospel. Let them be anathema. Tell them to go to hell in the name of Christ. They have nothing to do we the Holy Ones of God.