Confronting Our Demons
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Mark 1:21-28

If you were to recount the story of your own spiritual journey, where would you begin? Was there a longing or discovery that drew you in? An encounter with God or with others? Baptism? An experience during worship? The second step in a recovery program? A loss or an absence? Or maybe you’re still in the midst of it, waiting for all of the contours to become less fuzzy before you can name what’s been going on?

Maybe what was magnetic was a sense of meaning, or survival, or hope, or love. Westminster’s congregation comprises many stories.

The Gospel according to Mark asks us to consider the power of God as something that should arrest our attention and draw us into the story of Jesus Christ.

I recognize that stories of divine power might not be your thing, that you find yourself curious about God for other reasons. But when Mark tells the story, Mark urges us not to miss the
importance of power, because there are real threats to overcome in the world, and they require a show of strength if God’s intentions will come to fruition.

In Mark, the first detailed account of Jesus’ ministry among a crowd, after he has summoned his first disciples, is an exorcism. Mark describes it as a display of nearly unthinkable power. No cryptic incantations or special rituals, no prayers, tools, or physical combat—Jesus, “the Holy One of God” simply says, “Shut up and get out,” and the unclean spirit that has been tormenting a man flees. It’s an entirely one-sided confrontation between the Holy and the Unclean.

The other three Gospels tell it differently, because they want you to begin in different places. Matthew’s Gospel kicks off Jesus’ ministry with a long sermon that presents Jesus as a visionary and authoritative teacher of Jewish law. Luke begins by characterizing Jesus as the unique Prophet who will bring good news to the poor and usher in a time of jubilee. In John, Jesus gets his public start by creating abundance and blessing, so life can flourish right away, when he changes water into fine wine at a wedding.

But Mark’s Gospel is not much for subtlety or gradual development. Jesus’ first public act is to punch evil right in the mouth.
The arrival of the Holy overpowers the unclean. The crowds are stunned, and Jesus’ fame grows. This is what you get with Jesus, Mark tells us, the power to set you free.

The lesson of the story is striking, once we tease out its full implications. The kingdom—or “reign”—of God that arrives through Jesus has potential to remake everything about how we assumed the world is set up to work.

It’s important that we know what the Bible is saying about Jesus here, as his contemporaries would have understood an exorcism on an otherwise ordinary sabbath day.

The Gospels share a general worldview from the Judaism of that time. For them, evil or defiled spiritual forces held the world in a kind of subjugation. Notice that the Gospels prefer to call those forces not “demons” but “unclean spirits,” in contrast to the “Holy Spirit” that possesses Jesus and later his followers. What makes “unclean” or impure powers dangerous is that they are opposed to God, since God is the source of all life and holiness. Holy things and impure things can’t inhabit the same space. One of the major theological problems that we read about in scripture—in many discussions about laws, rituals, and the temple—is the question of how a holy God can be encountered by unholy people. What safeguards or rituals should be in place? What corruption needs to be cleansed or put out of the way?
Modern thinkers have a habit of responding to stories like this one, stories about people who aren’t in control of their own bodies and minds, by offering modern explanations. We wonder about mental illness and epilepsy and the limitations of ancient knowledge. There’s a place for those discussions. The Bible’s worldview rarely maps onto our own without adjustments. The stories in the Gospels, however, are less interested in the physiological presentations of these unclean spirits and more interested in the religious harm that can result—the threats those sources of defilement pose to individuals, communities, and their abilities to enjoy the benefits God provides. In other words, what we have here is a spiritual problem, which requires us to begin by taking stock of what that meant.

In the ancient world, people of all kinds of religions believed that you couldn’t come into contact with a god unless you were in a state of purity. And without that—without being able to commune with God—blessings, fulfillment, and wholeness were in jeopardy. What, then, would it mean to have an unclean, unnatural spirit inhabiting your body or terrorizing your community? It means we run the risk of driving God away, leaving us to fend for ourselves in dangerous circumstances.

The problem with impurity is deeper than temptation, sin, and bad choices. The problem is corruptibility, which leads to death. The demonic powers Jesus overwhelsms in the Gospels personify the destructive forces in our world that we human beings seem powerless to control.
In that religious outlook, death is not considered the peaceful conclusion of a well-lived life. Death is the ultimate defiler, because death means separation from God, the Lord of Life. Death breaks the image of God. It strips us of that gift, the image in which human beings were created.

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Many of us at Westminster have recently finished reading and discussing James Baldwin’s 1974 novel *If Beale Street Could Talk*. Baldwin tells a story about a young Black couple torn from one another because of false accusations and a contrived legal process. Through the entire narrative, an inescapable racist system envelops all of the action, inhabiting the characters’ consciousness. The book’s narrator, Tish, summarizes what it’s like to circulate within that oppressive, lethal environment when she describes the eyes of the police officer who tries to destroy her fiancé, named Fonny. Her description describes a demonic reality, even if the only real demonic “entities” in the book are just otherwise ordinary-looking people, like Officer Bell:

[The officer’s eyes—Tish tells us readers—] were as blank as George Washington’s eyes. But I was beginning to learn something about the blankness of those eyes. What I was learning was beginning to frighten me to death. If you look steadily into that unblinking blue, into that pinpoint at the center of the eye, you discover a bottomless cruelty, a viciousness cold and icy. In that eye, you do not exist: if you are lucky. *If* that eye, from its height, has been forced to
notice you, if you do exist in the unbelievably frozen winter which lives behind that eye, you are marked, marked, marked, like a man in a black overcoat, crawling, fleeing, across the snow. The eye resents your presence in the landscape, cluttering up the view. Presently, the black overcoat will be still, turning red with blood, and the snow will be red, and the eye resents this, too, blinks once, and causes more snow to fall, covering it all. Sometimes I was with Fonny when I crossed [Officer] Bell’s path, sometimes I was alone. When I was with Fonny, the eyes looked straight ahead, into a freezing sun. When I was alone, the eyes clawed me like a cat’s claws, raked me like a rake. These eyes look only into the eyes of the conquered victim. They cannot look into any other eyes.⁴

Baldwin describes the terrible power possessed by a single racist police officer. His power channels the fury of an entire racist system that seems dead-set on crushing what I would call “the image of God” in Tish and Fonny. It’s a reminder that we ourselves likely already know more than we care to admit about captivity, defiling forces, and death-dealing energy in American culture.

We recognize what it is to live in a world haunted and harassed by power that cuts us off—or cuts some of us off—from delighting in divine holiness. And if we don’t recognize it, then we need to listen to those who do.
In the Christian Old Testament and the Hebrew Bible there is an unusual book of romantic poetry called the Song of Solomon. It contains this brief bit of wisdom: “Love is strong as death, passion fierce as the grave. Its flashes are flashes of fire, a raging flame. Many waters cannot quench love, neither can floods drown it.”

Without whitewashing James Baldwin’s searing novel or presuming to speak for his experience, I wonder if the characters in *Beale Street* are animated by a similar kind of resistance. For them, love is strong as death. At least, their love is as strong as the death that possesses Officer Bell’s eyes. The love we encounter in the novel, held together by expanding and changing relationships, is fierce even though imperfect. It’s at times broken yet consistently unbreakable. Love can’t drive out the demonic racism that lurks for the story’s protagonists around every corner, but love does carve out sanctuary amid the horror, providing blessing and belonging.

Love fosters courage. Love brings about self-giving.

I don’t want to insert Jesus carelessly into Baldwin’s sober and incriminating depiction of American injustice. I’m not trying to fix or criticize his story. Rather, it’s the other way around. Let Baldwin adjust our vision as we turn our eyes back to the Bible and its statements about Jesus and his marvelous authority over the forces of death. *Beale Street*’s relentless love should instruct us about how to internalize the first chapter of Mark. Before we go out trumpeting the power of God over any foe, or assuming that
we can always situate ourselves on the side of holiness, we must remind ourselves that power can never truly liberate unless love is also involved.

Power without love risks trading one form of subjection for another.

Only power fused with love can be trusted to protect, restore, and repair us.

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Whatever the folks in Jesus’ orbit meant exactly when they conceived of demonic power and deadly impurity, they had in mind spiritual, moral, and social maladies that were utterly beyond their control.

By depicting Jesus as an exorcist extraordinaire, scripture urges us to realize that the reign of God does not take up residence in a world that waits patiently or makes room for it. In order to take hold and become a real, new state of affairs, God’s reign must dislodge forces that few of us consciously chose to swear allegiance to:

- The lies that manipulate our minds and infect our policies.
- The insecurities that make humanity so endlessly self-destructive.
- The contempt that numbs us to other people’s suffering.
• The instincts that cause us to crave sin over virtue, and that make us choose death and dehumanization over life and wholeness.

At the same time, we must recognize, ironically enough, that the church can find itself on the wrong side of the holiness-versus-impurity divide. Too often the church’s own teachings about sin and human nature have contributed to the falsehood and indignity. Those who deviate from narrow behavioral standards get labeled demonic. Children of God are themselves threatened with exorcisms because their sexual or gendered identities don’t conform to certain presumed norms. Congregations slip into the habit of pretending that sinfulness, imperfection, and struggle exist “out there,” and aren’t part of our own daily existence. When we pray “deliver us from evil,” we can’t delude ourselves into believing that evil is someone else’s problem.

The unclean spirit in our scripture text this morning fears that Jesus will “destroy” it. Jesus drives it away, but Mark doesn’t indicate that the source of oppression is totally eliminated. What Jesus does is deny the unclean spirit the authority or power to hold ultimate sway over a person’s life.

And so our ongoing prayer is for deliverance. The detail is important for us to keep in mind when we remember that Mark’s Gospel begins with divine strength. We can speak and sing about God’s glory and God’s power all we want. But we dare not fool ourselves into embracing a simplistic solution that underestimates either the persistence of struggle or the anguish
that we suffer and inflict on one another. Two things can be true at once: the crowd in the Capernaum synagogue is utterly amazed by Jesus’ extraordinary insights and power, and we continue to live in a world where death, inequity, greed, and fear harass us and obstruct our best efforts.

Part of the church’s role, then, is to call tirelessly on the power at the heart of the good news that God is here, a power propelled by love. We trust in that power as we combat the forces of death roaming our landscape. At times we will want to settle for a truce in this contest. We’ll try to convince ourselves that our spiritual journey has gone about as far as it should, lest it make us too uncomfortable or become too costly. We’ll be content with our own self-declared liberation. We’ll encounter pressure to settle for symbols and statements against racism instead of doing the hard and long labor of exorcising our minds, reforming our behavior, and rewriting our policies.

That could be endlessly discouraging work. It would deplete our supplies of wisdom and courage before too long if there wasn’t a particular promise and confidence driving us forward, keeping us engaged in the struggle, knowing that God accompanies us.

That promise resides at the other limit of Mark’s Gospel, at the end of the book. It’s where we learn that crucified power is still power. It’s just a different kind of power.
Because crucified love is still love.

This story that Mark tells—it begins with a display of astonishing power, and then concludes with another manifestation of divine strength, leaving everyone who perceives it dumbstruck. At the end of Mark, Jesus faces a foe much stronger than unclean spirits. It’s a foe mightier even than the Roman imperial system, whose cold eye catches Jesus and his plan for a new society in its sight. Death is the foe in this story. Jesus encounters death itself—that ultimate defiler of relationships, the mocker of hope, the end of dreams, the most common and presumably unholy thing a body can experience. Jesus, through the suffering of his own body, nevertheless reconfigures the power structure. He brings holiness into the experience of death itself.

And yet Jesus’ followers find the dead man’s tomb empty, confident that death has lost the battle it always wins. Because the power of Divine Holiness is such that it will usher in the reality of new life."

“For nothing will be impossible with God.”vii

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i In some ancient Jewish thinking, demonic powers were considered sources of impurity and death, because they themselves are, in a way, unnatural. They’re a perversion of the created order, and so they belong properly neither to heaven nor to earth.


iii Rabbi Brad Hirschfield gave me this insight about death and the divine image. He derives it from (1) a saying in the Mishnah declaring that a person who takes a single life
destroys an entire world (Sanh 4) and (2) a teaching about Hillel’s (or another sage’s) trip to the bathhouse as an act of caring for the image of God (Avot d’Rabbi Natan 2:30).


v Song 8:6–7
Set me as a seal upon your heart,
as a seal upon your arm;
for love is strong as death,
passion fierce as the grave.
Its flashes are flashes of fire,
a raging flame.
Many waters cannot quench love,
neither can floods drown it.
If one offered for love
all the wealth of his house,
it would be utterly scorned.

vi New Testament scholar Matthew Thiessen puts it like this: “By inserting a new, mobile, and powerfully contagious force of holiness into the world in the person of Jesus, Israel’s God has signaled the very coming of the new kingdom—a kingdom of holiness in life that throughout the mission of Jesus overwhelms the forces and sources of impurity and death, be they pneumatic, ritual, or moral. Throughout his narrative of Jesus’s life, Mark repeatedly depicts Jesus overcoming impurity after impurity. This dramatic story culminates in Jesus facing off with death itself in his crucifixion, taking ritual impurity into his very own body, only once again and with finality to come out victorious when God raises him from the dead.” (Jesus and the Forces of Death: The Gospels’ Portrayal of Ritual Impurity within First-Century Judaism [Baker Academic, 2020], 179.)