

Healing as salvation
Mark 1:21–28

I begin with a confession. When Karen, Dave, and I met to plan for the worship series that begins today, and when this exorcism story made it to the top of the list of healing stories that we chose, I was a bit disappointed. I had preached on this text at the end of January...what new could be said so soon?!

But of course, today is Pentecost and with the Holy Spirit of God, things are always being made new! And indeed, there is another Word of Good News from this story. Of course there is!

Before we get to the synagogue and to the story of the unclean spirit being cast out, I'd like to take our eyes to several earlier events in chapter 1 of Mark. The first is to John the Baptist. Notice that as people are coming to him, he tells them that he himself is baptizing with water, but that Jesus will be baptizing with the Holy Spirit. And as Mark tells the Jesus story, that's exactly what Jesus does. In Mark, there is no Pentecost event; rather, we see the Holy Spirit of God at work everywhere Jesus is. Jesus declared that the Kingdom of God is arrived, and with its arrival, the Holy Spirit is also arrived, blowing over chaos and breathing new life into being.

The other thing to see is that Jesus called two fishermen to be his disciples. I know, this is hardly remarkable. This is such a well-known detail and part of the story that it usually escapes attention. But through the lens of Pentecost, it caught my attention, and curiosity. Why fisherman? Mark has so few details, why is it important that we know the occupation of these two disciples?

Following the stirrings of the Spirit, I discovered that this occupation only shows up a couple of times in the Hebrew Bible. One of those is in Jeremiah 16 when the prophet is talking about hope, his vision of the descendents of Jacob returning home. And another

time in Ezekiel 37 as another vision of hope is described. This time with a view from the Temple and the river with flowing water and trees with their leaves for healing.

It is not random or incidental that Jesus chose fisherman. In doing so, he's recalling and activating these ancient visions and hopes. God's children are coming home!

And now we arrive at the synagogue with Jesus. And we see that pretty quickly, the presence of Jesus causes quite a stir. The gathering is "astounded." They say that he's teaching as "one having authority." Clearly an authority distinct from the authority of the scribes.

Now, from our vantage point, we might say, "Of course they were surprised and of course he had authority. After all, he *is* Jesus." But let's be curious! Why were they astounded? Why did they say he had authority? Mark says nothing about the content of his teaching, so we can guess that it wasn't the material that he was teaching.

On Pentecost Sunday, one of the possibilities that comes into view is that *the very presence of Jesus* is disturbing. Jesus was filled with the Holy Spirit. And of course the Spirit cannot be confined within the body of a human being! Not even Jesus! It blows and burns and breathes. The gathering may not have known why or even how to describe it, but surely the presence of the Holy Spirit was palpable. The gathering saw Jesus, a man, but a human being with a Spirit of aliveness and light and power that they had not seen before.

And they were astounded. Here was someone to pay attention to.

But it wasn't just the men in the synagogue who were astounded and stirred, there was also an unclean spirit who was caught by surprise and disturbed.

This spirit had managed to be part of the weekly gathering for who knows how long. Again, notice that Mark doesn't tell us anything about the nature of unclean. As listeners to this story, we have no idea what kind of spirit it was or how it manifested itself. That it was

unclean is apparently all we need to know. And it seems pretty clear that up until Jesus came, this spirit was comfortable in the synagogue, unnoticed by those gathered. The unclean spirit wasn't surprising or disturbing anyone.

But then Jesus, the beloved son of God, filled with the Holy Spirit of God shows up. And in the presence of so much Life and Light and Love, the comfort and security of the unclean spirit is threatened. The Spirit of God is filling the space, hovering...stirring, breathing, blowing.

And the unclean spirit has lost its hold. It's afraid of losing its host. And so it challenges Jesus, "Have you come to destroy us?" (Apparently there are other unclean spirits there who aren't talking?) But Jesus is God's Beloved, God's Son, and he's breathing the Breath of the Holy Spirit. Jesus won't engage the challenge and instead tells the unclean spirit to stop talking and come out. And it did.

But before we sit back and say, "good work, Jesus!" we need to see that this isn't the end of the story. This is the end of a particular scene in Mark's larger story of Jesus, but the thing that has just happened in the synagogue is not finished, in fact, it is just the beginning.

What we see in Mark's Gospel is that as Jesus goes from place to place, as he engages individuals and as they come home to their place in the Kingdom of God, the systems of the political and religious orders are being disturbed. As Jesus is healing and saving, and people are being restored to their places in their families and communities, and to their place in the heart of God, the structures that seek to oppress people are being shaken.

Sickness and healing in first 1st Palestine were about social systems and structures. In our 21st century Western worldview, sickness is being about viruses and pathogens. For us, diseases are physical and biological; individuals get sick. And when someone is sick, our response is to look for diagnoses and treatment. But in 1st century Palestine, when someone

got sick, it wasn't about viruses or biology, it was about something wrong in the social networks and structures. And so if I'm sick, I have to be removed from my family and my community, not because viruses are contagious, but because my sickness is an aberration, caused by my sin or an evil spirit. And so I have to be removed so that my sin or the evil spirit won't contaminate my family and community.ⁱ

What makes the healing of Jesus so transforming is that he isn't just curing diseases. (Consider that Mark hardly ever tells us anything about symptoms.) What is so profound about the healing is that Jesus *returns* people to their places in their families and communities. Bodies are healed, yes. An experience of salvation—of having been saved—happens when the person is restored back into their families and communities. And when they are, we see more clearly the activity of the Holy Spirit, which of course cannot be confined to a single body, but is now breathing new life, abundant life, into families and communities.

But the healing of Jesus isn't always well received. It can be threatening, especially to the oppressive systems of empire and religious institutions, which are founded on winners and losers, on insiders and outsiders. And that's what happened in the synagogue. While the unclean spirit no longer inhabited a particular body, the larger drama of the story is the disturbance to systems that oppress and exclude. Systems that depend on winners and losers, on some people being on top and others being on the bottom.

When Jesus told the unclean spirit to get out, the people who maintain oppressive systems and institutions started paying attention. Because healed people, people who have been restored and reconciled to their communities, people who know the power of salvation will be the undoing of oppressive systems. When people at the bottom are healed by the Spirit of God, they have a lightness of being, an aliveness, a power and energy...and they can no longer be oppressed, or excluded. They will simply rise up.

This is exactly the work of the Poor People's Campaign.

But on this Pentecost Sunday, what I want us to notice is that Jesus just keeps healing. To be sure, he confronts the oppressors. But he never engages in an oppositional conflict. He disturbs. He disrupts. But he never enters into win-lose arguments. Because the Kingdom of God isn't founded on winners or loser; it's created for life. For new life rising up, anywhere, everywhere, in anyone, in everyone. In the Kingdom of God, the Spirit of God is always hovering, stirring, blowing, breathing new life.

The default of us human beings, when we live from our own or some other unclean spirit, our default is to get into competitions and rivalries, to take oppositional postures that reduce people and issues to either/or, to winners/losers. Even we, Christians, Mennonites, we too get caught in this story of good and bad, of wanting good to win and bad to lose. So we cheer that the unclean spirit is exorcised. But we don't see the "bad" disturbance that Jesus' healing has caused. So we miss the fullness of the story, of what life in the Kingdom of God looks like.

Jesus was well aware of the disturbance he was creating. But he was okay with that because he knew...he knows...that

- Deep healing cannot happen unless our own pain, our wounds, and sins are touched and tended by the One who is full of the Holy Spirit of aliveness, light and power and love.
- Deep healing cannot happen unless we are willing to be astounded and disturbed by the systems that bind not only others, but also bind us.
- Deep healing cannot happen unless the unclean spirits are exposed, silenced, and asked to leave.
- Deep healing cannot happen unless that we can bear the shaking and convulsing of structures—of external structures, but also of our internal structures—that we thought were there to protect us but have been harming us all along.

On this Pentecost Sunday, as it was those many years ago, the Holy Spirit of God is present, hovering, stirring, blowing breathing...bringing us home. The Spirit of God that breathed aliveness and light and love into Jesus is still here. The Spirit of God that is life and love will not stop until all God's children are home, in the Kingdom of God. May we give ourselves to being disturbed and to being healed as the Spirit continues to hover, blowing over chaos and breathing until new life into being...and we are all healed...restored...saved.

ⁱ From Ched Myers' *Binding the Strong Man*