

Mark 1:21_39 NRSV

21 They went to Capernaum; and when the sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught. 22 They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes. 23 Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, 24 and he cried out, "What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God." 25 But Jesus rebuked him, saying, "Be silent, and come out of him!" 26 And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him. 27 They were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, "What is this? A new teaching—with authority! He[a] commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him." 28 At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.

29 As soon as they[b] left the synagogue, they entered the house of Simon and Andrew, with James and John. 30 Now Simon's mother_in_law was in bed with a fever, and they told him about her at once. 31 He came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them.

32 That evening, at sunset, they brought to him all who were sick or possessed with demons. 33 And the whole city was gathered around the door. 34 And he cured many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons; and he would not permit the demons to speak, because they knew him.

35 In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed. 36 And Simon and his companions hunted for him. 37 When they found him, they said to him, "Everyone is searching for you." 38 He answered, "Let us go on to the neighboring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do." 39 And he went throughout Galilee, proclaiming the message in their synagogues and casting out demons.

The Message

21_22 Then they entered Capernaum. When the Sabbath arrived, Jesus lost no time in getting to the meeting place. He spent the day there teaching. They were surprised at his teaching—so forthright, so confident—not quibbling and quoting like the religion scholars.

23_24 Suddenly, while still in the meeting place, he was interrupted by a man who was deeply disturbed and yelling out, "What business do you have here with us, Jesus? Nazarene! I know what you're up to! You're the Holy One of God, and you've come to destroy us!"

25_26 Jesus shut him up: "Quiet! Get out of him!" The afflicting spirit threw the man into spasms, protesting loudly—and got out.

27_28 Everyone there was incredulous, buzzing with curiosity. "What's going on here? A new teaching that does what it says? He shuts up defiling, demonic spirits and sends them packing!" News of this traveled fast and was soon all over Galilee.

29_31 Directly on leaving the meeting place, they came to Simon and Andrew's house, accompanied by James and John. Simon's mother_in_law was sick in bed, burning up with fever. They told Jesus. He went to her, took her hand, and raised her up. No sooner had the fever left than she was up fixing dinner for them.

32_34 That evening, after the sun was down, they brought sick and evil-afflicted people to him, the whole city lined up at his door! He cured their sick bodies and tormented spirits. Because the demons knew his true identity, he didn't let them say a word.

35_37 While it was still night, way before dawn, he got up and went out to a secluded spot and prayed. Simon and those with him went looking for him. They found him and said, "Everybody's looking for you."

38_39 Jesus said, "Let's go to the rest of the villages so I can preach there also. This is why I've come." He went to their meeting places all through Galilee, preaching and throwing out the demons.

I have been sick this last week or so. I rarely get so sick that I stop.... Though as I have gotten older, I have also gotten better about listening to my body and paying attention and following its directions. Well, it started with a cough. And I stopped. I stayed home, cancelled some appointments. I also didn't want to give whatever this was to anyone else. And we had a visioning day and I really wanted to be there. So, I rested, and by Friday I was feeling much better. We had a great time together on Saturday. And I felt well on Sunday too, and I was very glad on Saturday night that Gayle was preaching. Thank you, Gayle!! Monday started out well, but by Monday night, I felt a different kind of bug....a head cold coming on. I sneezed and sneezed all the way through Tuesday night. I cancelled appointments again. In the past, I would have tried to keep going...and tough it out and maybe I wouldn't have recovered so quickly. But I rested lots. By Wednesday I was feeling better and VERY hemmed in....and took a solo drive out to the coast. I wanted to feel the cool coastal breeze....but I didn't want to be cooped up with anyone else in the car....so I went alone. And breathed in the salt air. And took pictures.... and relaxed... and found some relief. Then, by Thursday afternoon, I was feeling much better... my energy was nearly back.

In years past, illness would have very likely been explained by an evil invasion within me....demons....I had done something wrong. I had sinned....and I was being punished with this illness that struck.. Well, it is certainly true that when we don't take care of ourselves, we may be more prone to stress related illnesses. Our immune system can become compromised. But there are viruses and illness out there and we can catch them. We also know today that mental illness is even more complicated and certainly not the result of demon possession .

Our lectionary scriptures over the last several weeks have been reminding us about Jesus' early ministry and giving us guidance on what it means to be a disciple....What does Jesus ask us to do? Jesus' baptism, helps us know deep within that we, too, are beloved children of God. Early on, Jesus called some to join him. He knew he wasn't supposed to do God's work alone and neither are we. Last week, Gayle helped us look at all the decisions we must make along the way, and how our experience of Jesus' message and ministry might guide our discernment process, as we choose the next right action... Today, Mark continues to give us glimpses into Jesus' early days. It would seem that after Jesus was baptized, things moved

quickly. He knew he was God's beloved. Jesus immediately began preaching the good news. He called some men to be his disciples, his helpers, his students. He and his followers entered the synagogue, where he continued to preach. People were amazed. A man who was crazed....knew Jesus was a holy One from God, but questioned him. Jesus cast out the demons in this troubled man....and healed him... Jesus called the man to sanity. Called the man to his senses.

After leaving the synagogue, the band moved on to Simon's mother in law's home. She was sick with a fever. In those times, illness was often explained by evil spirits....that had overwhelmed the individual. Jesus took her hand and she was healed.

Again.... immediately.... very quickly by Mark's telling, the word was traveling like wildfire. Who was this man? This healer? He continued to heal and to cast out demons.

I'm interested in the demons. We can look at this with our modern eyes and understanding as a fanciful tale. We know that physical and mental illness are not caused by possession of demons. And yet, do we?

Demons take many forms. Certainly demons are things that possess us.... that consume us and keep us from living full, whole, healthy lives. What are some of our demons today? What enslaves us? What limits us and prevents us from living fully? Just the other day, I was reading an article in Sojourners Magazine about some of the other beliefs that grab our attention. Stephen Mattson reminds us that there are other areas where many of us put our attention....put our faith....put our beliefs.

** “Few people pray more fervently, earnestly, and passionately than when their favorite sports teams — and athletes — are competing.”

** “Promising to tell the truth, reveal the truth, and promote the truth while vastly improving the standard of living, politics are the hope of billions of people — many of which will willingly dedicate their lives to the cause.” I know a woman who became sick with anxiety during that last political

season.... and isn't doing
much better today.

Some might say she is
possessed and certainly
overwhelmed by
powerlessness and fear.

** “Few things are more
essential within our
culture than the
must_have brands and
products that we can't
live without. The
iPhone, Google,
Facebook, and all of our
favorite apps. Take away
someone's smartphone
for a day — or even a
few minutes — and see
what happens. They can
hardly function without
it.” There are many
things that we are
attached to - our lives
are far from simple!

Stephen Mattson is illustrating
progressively more intense demons.... We
can see... we realize that our demons are
those things....those beliefs, those activities,
obsessions, and addictions that draw us
away from living fully....

Just a little later in Mark in the 5th chapter,

and in other gospels, we learn about a woman who had been bleeding for years. She is an outcast....she is unclean. She is isolated because of that culture's belief that Surely she must be afflicted because of some evil in her life...something must be possessing her. She is desperate and she touches Jesus' robe and is immediately healed. Jesus says, "Your faith has made you well." Your faith has healed you.

Don't we all have demons.... things that possess us, call out to us, demand our attention.... NOW!!!

Our faith, too, can make us well. But even knowing this, it can still seem impossible. In the scheme of things, biting my nails for 50 years was not life threatening.... but it was an obsession. It was a habit... that no matter what I had tried, I couldn't stop. More than 10 years ago now, I stopped.

I'm an emotional eater.... I used to believe that there were foods that could comfort me, foods that could make everything all better. Now I realize I was giving some foods way more power than they deserved. Foods can nourish. Foods can heal....but too much can hurt me and damage my health. Today I have a healthier relationship with food. We could say that the demons that drove me to bite my nails

and to overeat have been driven out....cast out. Thank you God!!

This week, I listened to a rare interview of poet Mary Oliver. She is a very private person and has shared very little about her personal life.....though she has shared intimately in her poetry. We know little of what helped to make Mary Oliver the woman she is today. In that interview, I learned that Mary has been possessed by demons....from her early years... in her words, she had a “very bad childhood and walking in the woods saved my life.” She said, she “escaped barely with years of trouble.” She also said she was “saved by poetry and the beauty of the world.”

Hear her struggle and her hope in “A Thousand Mornings”

All night my heart makes its way
however it can over the rough ground
of uncertainties, but only until night
meets and then is overwhelmed by
morning, the light deepening, the
wind easing and just waiting, as I
too wait (and when have I ever been
disappointed?) For redbird to sing.

She has had many challenges in life....a bad childhood, writing and tossing out many bad poems, struggling with finding her way to gain the confidence to publish her poems....living very poor for many years....

loving her partner....watching her die and
leave her....struggling a few years ago with
cancer, moving recently to Florida from
her longtime home in Massachusetts...

Mary Oliver has known her demons....and
continues to find solace in the woods... in
nature.... She continues to ask herself,
“What is the life that I shall live?” She
loves poetry herself....saying that people
learn poems - memorize them and find
themselves there....

“As they might a prayer.... then it belongs
to you. It’s closer to singing than prose...
poems go all the way through you.” She
has come to trust that life is “endlessly
fascinating” but not without lots of work
to put the demons at bay.

We all have demons.... Jesus calls us as
disciples to do what we can to drive the
demons out....to be of support to others in
ways that can exorcize the hurts and
distractions and attitudes that keep us from
being all that we are meant to be.

How do we do this for and with each
other?

Spending time with others
offering to listen

Take walks together and enjoy nature.

Music heals the soul

Being in small supportive, covenant groups
(like the ones I hope you all will join
during Lent)

Coming to worship

We let each other know through our actions, that we are loved....that someone cares, that there are healthy, effective ways to handle those things that are troubling us and that we don't have to do this alone.

This is also what it means to be part of a faith community.

And of course, there is prayer.

That evening, at sunset,
they brought to Jesus all
who were sick or
possessed with demons.
And the whole city was
gathered around the
door. And he cured
many who were sick
with various diseases,
and cast out many
demons... In the
morning, while it was
still very dark, he got up
and went out to a
deserted place, and there
he prayed.

We all also need down time....alone
time....time to renew our weary
selves....sometimes this is forced on us
when we get sick.... but we can also be
intentional about this. Prayer is quiet time,
but many things we do can be done

prayerfully - sitting quietly, reading poetry
or scripture or other holy literature,
walking in nature.

Hear another one of Mary Oliver's
descriptions -
I HAPPENED TO BE STANDING
~ Mary Oliver

I don't know where prayers go,
or what they do.
Do cats pray, while they sleep
half_asleep in the sun?
Does the opossum pray as it
crosses the street?
The sunflowers? The old black oak
growing older every year?
I know I can walk through the world,
along the shore or under the trees,
with my mind filled with things
of little importance, in full
self_attendance. A condition I can't really
call being alive.
Is a prayer a gift, or a petition,
or does it matter?
The sunflowers blaze, maybe that's their
way.
Maybe the cats are sound asleep. Maybe
not.

While I was thinking this I happened to be
standing
just outside my door, with my notebook

open,
which is the way I begin every morning.
Then a wren in the privet began to sing.
He was positively drenched in enthusiasm,
I don't know why. And yet, why not.
I wouldn't persuade you from whatever
you believe
or whatever you don't. That's your
business.
But I thought, of the wren's singing, what
could this be
if it isn't a prayer?
So I just listened, my pen in the air.

Probably overwhelmed and feeling very
tired...

“Early in the morning, while it was still
very dark, Jesus got up and went out to a
deserted [secluded] place, where he could
be alone in prayer.”

As we go deeper in our preparation as
disciples, what must we cast off and let go
of? What must we invite in to our lives so
that we might live fully, and wholly as
God intends?