

The Beginning of the Good News
A Study of the Gospel of Mark
The Episcopal Diocese of West Texas
Fall 2015

Banishing Spirits of Oppression 1:21-29; 5:1-20

Some things to think about...

The role of unclean spirits in daily life

People in the ancient world talked openly and frequently about the powerful effects of various spirits that influenced their daily lives. A number of first-century Jews - including Jesus, his disciples, and his followers in the early church - acknowledged the existence and recognized the impact of these spiritual forces in the world. They understood that spirits were actively at work in the world opposing God's will for justice, peace, and human flourishing. These spiritual forces often worked their destructive power on people through human agents, such as the oppressive leadership and military force of the Roman Empire, or the Jewish religious leaders and tax collectors who collaborated with Rome and made life so much more burdensome for ordinary Jewish people. The first-century Jewish and Christian understanding of the role of spirits in daily life leads to the language of spirit-possession we hear in the two passages designated for today.

Some modern people look down on this talk of spiritual forces that oppose God's will and dismiss it as mere superstition. As you study today's readings, be open to this ancient way of thinking about spiritual influences in your life. Reflect on the different forces that shape your life today and pay attention to the specific ways these forces affect how you interpret and respond to the world around you.

Only the unclean spirits recognize the *real* identity of Jesus

In the Gospel of Mark, only the unclean spirits recognize Jesus unequivocally as God's powerful agent sent to liberate people from Satan and the unclean spiritual forces that destroy people's lives. This unique feature of the Gospel highlights Mark's emphasis on the cosmic battle taking place between God and the forces of evil. According to Mark, humans participate in this spiritual struggle, even as they seem unable to recognize or comprehend the full nature of the conflict. Jesus tells his disciples that they must walk behind him closely for their eyes to be opened to his true identity as God's suffering Messiah who liberates the oppressed from the spiritual forces that bind them.

The Roman Empire protected its borders through military occupation

The territory beyond the Jordan River and the Sea of Galilee formed the easternmost boundary of the Roman Empire. From historical records we know that the Romans stationed Legions of soldiers along that eastern border to protect against incursions to the Empire from the east. A "Legion" is the primary organizational unit of Rome's military forces, usually consisting of about six thousand men. Our second exorcism story takes place east of the Sea of Galilee on

the Roman Empire's easternmost boundary, a territory not only under the political administration of the Roman Empire but also tightly controlled through military occupation by several Legions of Roman soldiers.

Attending to the Word...

Read each of the two exorcism stories. Who recognizes and acknowledges the true identity of Jesus? By what names do they call Jesus? Compare these with the names that Peter and the other disciples apply to Jesus in Mark 8:27-30. What are the differences? What do the various names applied to Jesus by his disciples suggest about his character or ministry in the world?

As you read the first exorcism story (1:21-29), count the number of times the noun "teaching" or the verb "teach" appear. In 1:22 the people are "shocked out of their senses" by the teaching of Jesus (a livelier translation of the Greek verb translated simply as "astounded" in the New Revised Standard Version). This is one of four different passages in Mark's Gospel where the people are "shocked out of their senses" by the teaching of Jesus (see also 6:2; 10:26; 11:18). Even though Mark does not often give us the content of Jesus' teaching, Mark emphasizes regularly that the teaching of Jesus forces people out of their comfort zone, opens them to new insights, and prompts them to ask deeper questions. In today's story, the people in the synagogue even attribute the exorcism of the unclean spirit to the teaching of Jesus (1:27). What might Mark be suggesting as the source of the man's unclean spirit in today's first exorcism story?

In the second exorcism passage for today, describe the detailed characteristics of the man with the unclean spirit. In what ways is the man responsible for some of his own physical injuries? When Jesus asks the man his name, who seems to respond? What is the name given to Jesus? Does their name possibly suggest the source of the man's unclean spirit from Mark's point of view? Does the rushing of the pigs into the water, followed by their drowning, remind you of any particular story from the Old Testament about how God liberated the Israelites from occupation and oppression? Does that Old Testament story shed any light on Mark's understanding of the power at work in Jesus? What is the response of the local people of the region when they see the demoniac clothed and in his right mind? What is their response to Jesus? What might Mark be suggesting about how the demoniac and his community may have internalized the oppressive power of the Roman Empire?

Making the Word your own...

By what name(s) do you know Jesus? In what ways do your different names for Jesus positively influence and shape your life?

Can you tell a story about a recent time when a particular teaching was freeing for you or caused you to ask deeper, more important questions about your life? Can you tell a story about a time when a teaching "shocked you out of your senses" so that you were finally open to seeing things from a completely new perspective?

Can you identify some specific cultural influences that sometimes cause you to act in ways harmful to you or those you love? Can you tell a story about a time when Jesus freed you from a cultural influence that was harmfully impacting your life?