

Has He Come To Destroy Us?  
Deuteronomy 18:15-20  
Mark 1:21-28

“Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, 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.’”

I imagine the people in the synagogue in Capernaum on that sabbath were a lot like the people who have populated synagogues and church sanctuaries from the beginning. A lot like us.

On the one hand, they are there to hear a word from the Lord that just might make sense of the disparate pieces of their little lives; or to hear a word from the Lord that comforts them in the face of everything that threatens to undo them; or to hear a word from the Lord that confirms their own perspective on the current state of affairs in the land.

On the other hand, the people are NOT there to hear a word from the Lord that calls into question the lives they are leading; are NOT there to hear a word from the Lord that afflicts what little comfort they had when they woke up that morning; are NOT there to hear a word from the Lord that destroys the selves they have so carefully hidden beneath their sabbath best.

In sum, most of them had come not to be changed but to hear their second-rate scribe teach what scribes had taught God’s people for generations about the day’s portion of Torah and to participate in the predictable life of the community that had formed them since birth. Maybe they would hear a word to sustain them in a week that likely would overwhelm them with work or numb them by routine. Maybe not. It was hit and miss.

Given our portion of Torah today from Deuteronomy, this second-rate scribe is taken with the contrast between the prophetic word God promised on the edge of the wilderness and the pedantic word most of God’s people come to hear in the hour of worship, the word you are about to hear being no exception! What had become of God’s assurance to Moses that God would raise up a prophet like Moses, a prophet who would have God’s words in his mouth and who would speak to them everything that God commanded? To be sure, after their terrifying experience at the foot of Sinai when they begged *Moses* to speak to them but never again to let *God* speak to them lest they die, surely God acknowledged the need for God’s word to be mediated through the voice of a less daunting human being. Yet on that morning in the synagogue in Capernaum, the underwhelming words the people were expecting to come out of the mouths of the scribes was a faint echo of the word of God that God’s prophets had been given to speak to God’s people from the day they entered the land God had promised until now.

Practically speaking, Israel’s teachers dealt with timeless issues of text and Torah, while the prophets, Abraham Heschel wrote, are “thrown into orations about widows and orphans, about the corruption of judges and affairs of the marketplace. Instead of showing us a way through the elegant mansions of the mind,” he roars, “the prophets take us to the slums....To us a single act of injustice—cheating in business, exploitation of the poor—is slight; to the prophets, a disaster. To us injustice is injurious to the welfare of the people; to the prophets it is a deathblow to existence; to us, an episode; to them, a catastrophe, a threat to the world....They speak and act as if the sky were about to collapse because Israel has become unfaithful to God....[Theirs] is the voice that God has lent to the silent agony, a voice to the plundered poor, to the profaned riches of the world.”

You likely can understand why prophets are not put in charge of maintaining institutional religion. Priests and scribes, the keepers of the status quo, are those who have been taught to manage God’s dangerous presence in the Holy of Holies by way of prescribed rituals and have been set apart to mediate God’s presence through well-considered words that will keep people coming and tithing and trusting that even if the lesson on God’s word is deathly dull, it will be enough to go on; whereas prophets are wreckers of the status quo, whose words let loose the dangerous presence of God on a world grown dull and indifferent to God’s purposes. If a visiting prophet should show up to ruffle the congregation’s feathers once or twice a year, no matter. The prophet’s “breathless impatience with injustice” provides a sort of vicarious, limited experience of solidarity with the poor and outcast yet without the need really to do anything more than be amazed and express appreciation for the message at the door. “Quite a challenging word; a lot to think about; hope you can come again,” they say in the narthex, knowing that the prophet is moving on and the slightly dull, second-rate scribe will be unrolling the scroll next week as usual.

On this sabbath in Capernaum, however, the one who stood up to teach was neither a priest managing God's word nor a prophet mouthing God's word but God's Son, the beloved, in whom God's reign had come near. Mark says that the congregation initially was astounded at his teaching, yet they were astounded not at what he taught but how he taught: for he taught as one who had authority and not as the scribes. What does that mean? The Greek word for authority means "out of one's essence." Jesus' authority was not an authority conferred from the outside by religion. He was not an authorized interpreter of God's word. Jesus' authority was not even the authority of one who had been chosen by God to speak God's word as if the sky were about to collapse. He was not a bona fide prophet. Rather in his person, in his essence, God's reign over evil and death had begun, right then and there, in his word. When Jesus entered in, God's presence, God's promises, God's future drew near. He himself mediated the immediacy of God.

Mark says they were astonished, but I do not think the congregation had a clue about the cause of their astonishment save for one in the crowd. Only the odd man out in the congregation really realized who Jesus was that day. Or rather, as is the case throughout Mark's Gospel, it was the demon, the unclean spirit, the evil one about to be defeated who knew what it was up against and so called Jesus by name. "What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us?" the voice shouts from out of a man who, otherwise, must have been one of the synagogue's regulars. Then the spirit called Jesus by name: "I know who you are, the Holy One of God." With God's reign of love encroaching on the territory heretofore claimed by the unclean spirit, whatever life-deadening power that had hold of this man knew the jig was up. The territory occupied in him by the nothingness-that-the-powers-of-darkness-are was being invaded and conquered by the reign of love coming near in Jesus.

But here is the unspoken more in Mark's story that I would bet my life on: those same demons were lurking in everyone who had come into the synagogue that day even as they are lurking in each of us. Where are the demons," Karl Barth asks in a chapter that is brief because he wants to give the devil no more than his due. "Where not?" he replies. "They are there in the depths of the soul which we regard as properly our own.... They are there in [our] care and carelessness, in the flaming up and extinguishing of [our] passions, in [our] sloth and zeal, in [our] inexplicable stupidity and astonishing cleverness,.... in the conflict and concord of classes, peoples and nations...."

I do not know what unclean spirits have taken up residence in the depths of the soul which you regard as properly your own. If you think there are none, you are the most deceived. I do not know how much territory you have ceded over the years to whatever fear or obsession or hatred or anxiety or suspicion or self-righteousness that keeps you from living the life you have been given by God to live. I only know that the occupiers of these hidden depths of our soul will know, long before our socially acceptable selves know, that Jesus has come to destroy them.

This, of course, is the good news I have for you as your second-rate scribe this morning. I am here simply to point you toward the Holy One of God who is no less alive today than he was that day in Capernaum. He has come this morning to destroy whatever is separating you from God and from one another. But more. For he is also walking through our city's streets, our nation's capital, our planet's ruins where the unclean spirits of opioids, of gun violence, of greed, of racism, of inequality, of human trafficking, of poverty, of disease, of bigotry, and of hatred are crying out, "What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us?"

And here is the daunting news I have for you this morning as your second-rate scribe: we are his body when we walk those streets and into his sanctuaries. He is has given all authority to us. The community of disciples he began gathering long ago is this community now sent into the world to live as though God's reign has begun, as though death has no dominion, as though the territory once occupied by unclean spirits is being conquered by his love. When we walk through those streets in his name, the demons should be crying out, "Have you come to destroy us?" because, in his name, we have.

I imagine this of us and then I remember that, on this Sunday morning, you are being led by a second-rate scribe like me, prepared to teach today's portion of Torah, afraid to be too prophetic in these divisive time and so powerless first set you free from the demons within unless, by his grace, these inadequate words and this font and table should point you to the Holy One of God in whom God's reign has come near to destroy you and save you. Thanks be to God.