

“A CLASH OF POWERFUL FORCES”

Epiphany 4B; Lectionary 4

February 1, 2015

Peace Lutheran
Grass Valley, CA

FOR FUN:

At breakfast, a woman said to her husband, "I'll bet you don't know what day this is."
"Of course I do," he answered, as if he was offended, and left for the office.

At 10:00 a.m., the doorbell rang and when the woman opened the door, she was handed a box of a dozen long stemmed red roses. At 1:00 p.m., a foil-wrapped, two-pound box of her favorite chocolates was delivered. Later, a boutique delivered a designer dress.

The woman couldn't wait for her husband to come home.

"First the flowers, then the chocolates and then the dress!" she exclaimed. "I've never had a more wonderful Groundhog Day in my life!"

TEACHING POINTS:

1. Powerful forces clash in the Super Bowl and in Mark's story.
2. Unclean and evil spirits, while not much part of our conversation are real, even in the community of faith.
3. Mark's story isn't so much about unclean spirits as it is about Jesus' authority.
 - a. A different and new authority.
 - b. The unclean spirit shows power by "naming" Jesus.
 - c. Jesus has authority to silence the unclean spirit.
4. What about authority in our own lives?
5. Jesus creates a spirit of life under God's grace.

THE MESSAGE:

This afternoon is the clash of super forces. Not our annual meeting. But Super Bowl XLIX (49) between the Seattle Seahawks and the New England Patriots. The Patriots have three previous Super Bowl victories in six appearances. The Seahawks are the defending champions, being the sixteenth team to appear in two Super Bowls in a row, something that the Patriots did back in 2003 and 2004 (winning both). If Seattle wins, it would be the 8th time this has occurred.

The story of Jesus and the person possessed by an "unclean spirit" from Mark's Gospel today is a story about the clash of powerful forces. In fact, it is the story of the clash of good and evil. Unlike the Super Bowl, it is a clash of a clear underdog and a clear winner.

This story of Jesus confronting the evil spirit within a man in the synagogue seems pretty out of place in our experience. For us, demons and evil spirits are the stuff of grade C horror movies. In them, the devil is a funny little creature in red tights with

a pitchfork in hand. In our experience, demons and spirits are something weird and surreal.

While most translations of this scripture have “evil spirit”, the more accurate image is “unclean”. It has to do with “spirits that have not been cleansed or cleaned.” This adds a whole new twist to how we might look at the “unclean spirit” that had a hold on the man in the synagogue.

So, despite the fact that “unclean spirits” are not part of our common talk and seem out of place in our daily experience, I’m convinced that evil and unclean forces exist. I believe that they take over people’s lives. I’ve seen the unclean spirits of fear, anxiety, control, vengeance and appetite crouch in the dark places of people's hearts and souls. I’ve seen the evil spirits that cause racial violence and domestic abuse. I’ve seen them as the tempters that entice people to throw their lives and souls away for money, sex or drugs. I know the unclean spirits of our sin that wants us to believe we are “in charge” or tempt us to move from under the authority of God over our lives.

If I’m completely honest, there have been times in my life -- and I suspect in your life too -- when it would have been a wonderful thing to have Jesus say to something within me, "Come out of him!" It might be as simple as wanting a desire for food loaded with saturated fat to be taken out of us. Or it might be as difficult as wishing a craving for something destructive would be sent packing. Or it might be as hard wanting God to show God’s power over all that distracts one from being fully a disciple and fully submissive to God’s authority.

That having been said, the Markan story isn’t about the existence of unclean spirits. The Bible assumes their existence. It even seems to assume that they are not uncommon even in the house of worship and the people gathered there—there is no sudden appearance of this man. He is simply there.

So the theme becomes the authority of Jesus. “They were amazed ... because he taught as one who had authority” “A new teaching with authority.” “He even has authority over the unclean spirits”. Jesus has a new kind of authority that has a new kind of power. Jesus is demonstrating something of wonder.

Last week, I noted that it was common for a person who had been a rabbi disciple to gain, by the age of 30, from experience and from their rabbi, sufficient “authority” to begin their own work.

Jesus comes to teach and act with that authority. Jesus enters on the scene at the beginning of ministry with authority. What up, though, is that this authority isn’t like the scribes. It isn’t a quoting of what others have said. It isn’t relying on tradition or past interpretations of the law. Jesus has an “authority” that comes from within, that comes from who he is and what he does. Indeed, Jesus has a new teaching and authority—from God.

Some people were offended and said, "Who does this carpenter think he is and what is he doing?" The person who steps up to answer that question is a man with an unclean spirit.

It is as if he just suddenly appears from within the synagogue, the house of worship. Provoked and exposed by the presence of Jesus, this spirit doesn't come in from outside, but emerges from inside the house of worship. He is, if you will, the spirit of the synagogue, a spirit that manifests itself through this poor man the minute Jesus appears and opens his mouth and teaches.

You see, the very presence of Jesus and his authority provokes and exposes the "unclean spirit" that is at work. Jesus provokes and exposes the other forces that want to claim authority and/or usurp the power of the eternal God. So, here, right off, we catch a glimpse of the aim of Jesus ministry – to create space for a different spirit: the Spirit of life. To create a space where false, destructive spirits that blight and overshadow life are resisted and dethroned and where a different Spirit – the spirit of life, of health, of wholeness under the authority of God -- operates. So, the clash of forces plays out with the unclean spirit coarsely uttering, "What do you want with us?" "Have you come to destroy us?" "I know who you are, the Holy One of God."

At once it is clear what the unclean spirit is trying to do. Remember, in ancient times to know someone's name meant to hold power over them – that's part of what's behind God giving Adam authority to "name" the animals. To know one's name is to have access to their true selves -- hence God's reluctance to disclose God's own name. Here this evil and unclean spirit, using his knowledge of Jesus' name, is seeking to overpower Jesus and to dominate him. This spirit is trying to exert authority and power, to win the clash of powerful forces. It is as though heaven and hell, light and darkness, right and wrong are at war.

In the clash of forces Jesus silences the false and unclean spirit. Jesus silences the power that wants to usurp Jesus' authority. Jesus claims his voice, his place. The people are amazed. The man stands quietly—at peace. Evil knows what Jesus has come to do. Evil sees that Jesus has authority – a new authority from God – that tells evil where to go.

This clash of forces gives us an opportunity to look at the "authorities" under which we live. As we meditate on the authority of Jesus, we can ask, "What authorities rule my life?" "Just who or what – internally or externally – is my boss?" You might write them down and prioritize them, be they money, my self-interest, my image, Jesus, my social standing, my family or my work.

And then, there is the opportunity to ask, "What might it mean for me to accept Jesus as a primary authority in my life?"

There's an old Native American story about a chief instructing some braves about the struggle within. "It is like two dogs fighting inside of us," the chief told them. "There is one good dog who wants to do the right and the other dog wants to do the wrong. Sometimes the good dog seems stronger and is winning the fight. But sometimes the bad dog is stronger and wrong is winning the fight."

"Who is going to win in the end?" a young brave asks.

"The one you feed," the chief answered.

The only food available to feed the good dog within us comes from above; it comes from outside of us. It is the food of hope and grace whose singular nutritional authority is of God.

Amen.