

Year B, Epiphany 4
Deuteronomy 18:15-20
Psalm 111
1 Corinthians 8:1-13
Mark 1:21-28

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Rutherfordton, NC
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May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be always acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer. *Amen.*

Today's Gospel lesson is often referred to as "The Exorcism at Capernaum." It occurs early in Mark's Gospel and early in Jesus' public life and ministry, chronologically following his baptism, his forty days in the wilderness, his announcement that "the Kingdom of God is at hand," and his calling of the disciples. More than any of the Gospels, Mark emphasizes Jesus's power to heal, and that includes exorcisms. There are eighteen miracles recorded in the Gospel of Mark; thirteen of them involve healing, and four of the thirteen are exorcisms.

Like many other modern-day churches, at St. Francis the laying on of hands and anointing with oil for healing is offered in our worship once each month. The Episcopal Church developed and authorizes an entire service for it, and when inviting people to come to receive healing prayers and anointing, I usually read a portion of that service to remind us that we are following the example of Jesus and of his disciples after him.

There are numerous reasons why people come for healing. Those include physical ailments, emotional and mental troubles, grief, stress—all sorts of things that often are not named, nor asked to be named before hands are laid on them. I believe God knows what is in our hearts and what is weighing on our hearts, and God is certainly capable of taking care of these things, whether I know what they are or not. My role is mediator and intercessor, and I pray that God will work through me to bring comfort and healing to those who are suffering in body, mind, or spirit; yet I am always aware that modern advances in medicine and health care have changed our understanding of human ailments and how to treat them. Nonetheless, as Christ-followers, we believe in the divine power of healing and see it as an important part of the healing process, even when other means of treatment are being used.

In the days of Jesus' ministry, things were very different. Conditions and illnesses which can be identified and treated in our time were mysterious and frightening in those days, conditions like that of the man with an unclean or impure spirit whom Jesus found when he entered the synagogue in Mark's story. When we hear about demoniacs or people with unclean spirits, our imaginations are likely to conjure up images from movies like "The Exorcist" or "Rosemary's Baby," which depicted an horrific manifestation of evil and an elaborate process for removing the evil being that had taken over a woman's body. We are influenced too much by Hollywood, so much so that even the thought of exorcism alarms and frightens us. While there is no denying the presence of evil in our world, the biblical language used to describe it is often simply the words "impure" or "unclean," words that mean "that which is contrary to the sacred." Anything that goes against the sanctity of God fits in that category, even in the lives of the faithful who sometimes stumble from the path of righteousness, and even in the lives of the faithful who mistakenly believe they are called to resolve God's business in situations that are better left to God.

There is, also, real evil, which often manifests itself in subtle ways. So sometimes we don't recognize evil, and it is so frightening to us that most of us do not want to mess with it even when we do recognize it. We will do everything we can to stay away from it, whether it manifests itself to us as a person, a group, as individual behavior, or as a corporate or cultural practice, and if we're paying attention we know there is plenty of that. Whether or not we recognize it, we must be aware that evil surrounds us. For many years, the church followed the example of Christ in performing exorcisms in a variety of ways, most notably on children and adults who were to be baptized. Even the water to be used for their baptisms was exorcised before it was blessed. Over time, the specific prayers for exorcism have been reduced to phrases like the one we say in the Lord's Prayer, "deliver

us from evil,” and other similar petitions in our baptismal prayers. We believe that once we have been given to God in Christ as infants or children, or have given ourselves to Christ through the rite of baptism as adults, we are sealed as Christ’s own forever. That is both our shield and our armor, protecting us from evil.

While it is still practiced today, the rite of exorcism is not something to be taken lightly. Although it is growing more “popular” in some fundamentalist denominations and churches, a request for exorcism in both the Episcopal and Roman Catholic churches must be made by a local priest to a Bishop. Priests like me are not trained to do exorcisms, and for that I am thankful. We believe that this is dangerous territory, for a variety of reasons. The line between good and evil can be thin, particularly when mental illness is involved, and I’m not gifted or trained or equipped to make that judgment. I don’t believe any of you are either.

While we are on this subject, yes, I do believe in spiritual warfare; however, I believe that we are called by Christ to engage in it in the ways we promise through our baptisms, promises we renewed only a few weeks ago: by renouncing Satan and all the spiritual forces of wickedness that rebel against God; by renouncing the evil powers of this world which corrupt and destroy God’s creatures; by renouncing all sinful desires that draw us away from the love of God; and by turning to Jesus Christ as our savior. Renounce is a strong word that we may not fully understand. It means “to give up, refuse, or resign, usually by formal declaration.” That doesn’t mean we renounce evil once, or renounce it only on those occasions each year when we renew our baptismal covenant. Renouncing evil is an ongoing, continuous process that calls us to stand up and speak out. In our world, the occasions to do that are abundant and continuous, requiring us to be alert, vigilant, and courageous in Christ. That means we are to be prayerful and cautious as well, guided by the divine Spirit of God as we proceed.

Surely it was the Spirit of God that led Jesus to know when and how to heal those who came to him, and to know when and how there were truly evil spirits to be exorcised. One of the most frequent lessons we learn about Jesus through the Gospels written about him is that he often spent time with God, not only in prayer, but also listening to God and simply being in God’s presence so that he could hear God’s voice. That is one of the ways that we also discern our actions, that is, how we come to know and understand what God is calling us to do. Those times Jesus spent alone with God were surely occasions when our Lord’s divine and human natures became one. None of us, as best I can tell, are both fully human and fully divine or even fully human and partly divine; but for us, too, our communion with God provides opportunities for us to better understand God’s presence in our lives, for us to know and love God with all our hearts, and for our desire to obey God to grow stronger than our human desires. The Gospel stories of Jesus’ healing miracles are written to show us the power and authority of God brought to us in the person of our Lord Jesus Christ. No matter how hard we try, no matter how much we want it, as human beings we can never, we will never, share in that power. We are sadly mistaken and terribly misguided if we think otherwise.

After Jesus taught in the synagogue, the man with the unclean spirit 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.” Jesus rebuked him and the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him.” Those whom Jesus had taught “were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, “What is this? A new teaching—with authority!” May we also be amazed, astounded and awestruck by the power and authority of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. And may the Almighty Lord, who is a strong tower to all who put their trust in him, to whom all things in heaven, on earth, and under the earth bow and obey, be now and evermore our defense, and make us know and feel that the only Name under heaven given for health and salvation is the Name of our Lord Jesus Christ. *Amen.*