

“Scared out of my mind”

- Have I ever told you the point at which I stopped watching scary movies?
 - Well, you see the Gospel for today reminded me and brought back this particular memory
 - Of when I was in my early 20s, just married, and back when Netflix was only a mail-order DVD rental service... ages ago!
 - We received our disc in the mail, and one night we decided to watch it right before going to bed
 - Because we stayed up past 9:30 back then!
 - The scariest movie I think I have ever watched, and what even changed the types of movies I enjoyed
 - Was the Exorcism of Emily Rose.
 - Ok, maybe it didn't stop me from watching scary movies completely, but I do usually watch them in the afternoon rather than before bed
 - Yes, the demons were scary, they made her voice change, and they did scary, demon stuff
 - But do you know what was even more scary about that movie?
 - The fact that Emily Rose was just a normal 18 year old who went off to college and lived in a dorm
 - What supposedly happened to her, whether it be demon possession or schizophrenia, as the other side of the debate proposed
 - It happened for no reason and was beyond her control- she was at the mercy of what ever was happening
 - And that's the thing- the movie did not answer any questions, and left the watcher wondering if they believed in the supernatural
 - Whether something like this did really happen, and perhaps could happen again, perhaps could happen to me
 - We turned off the movie, and went to bed, and I stared at the ceiling and the clock
 - I heard every little movement outside, the wind, the trees, the ticks of the clock, the pops of the house

- Surely you've been there, at the place where your imagination just gets the best of you
- And at 2am, I gave up, got out of bed, and went and tried to watch something else on TV to clear my mind
- Perhaps you are like me, and when you read passages such as this from the Bible, what you remember are Hollywood moments like that movie
 - Or perhaps you approach movies and read these accounts with skepticism
 - Asking how something so foreign to our modern understanding of the world can help our lives of faith today?¹
 - But I want to suggest to you that if we moved passed the demon in this story
 - Put aside our mental pictures of spinning heads, green pea soup, weird voices, and the smell of sulfur²
 - That what is within this section of Mark applies as much to us today as it did to the listeners who heard it some thirty years after Jesus died
- Today we hear of Jesus, not too long after his baptism and temptation in the desert
 - And joining a local synagogue for worship on the Sabbath³
 - From what Mark recounts, I must say Jesus sounds like a pretty charismatic kind of guy
 - One teaching from authority, and completely upstaging the Scribes⁴
 - Just then, in what is traditionally a Mark style of writing, a demon possessed man interrupts the service
 - Can you just picture that for a minute, someone busting through those doors and yelling half coherent statements? (acting like Emily Rose)
 - The man, however, recognizes Jesus for who is really is- there's the Epiphany for today
 - Notice that the Scribes in the story still do not see Jesus clearly
 - And the demon is worried, and rightfully so, for Jesus commands the demon to be silent and to come out

¹ PrRCL 136

² Feasting #4, 311

³ PrRCL 135

⁴ Feasting #3, 311

- Thus restoring the order of the Sabbath, and providing a reputation of a healer and a miracle worker in the surrounding area
- While we do not share the same understanding of the universe as these ancient believers
- You and I still struggle with the same fears and the same search for God in life's chaos as did early believers when this Gospel was written
- This would be the take away for the early Christian believer
- For the demon possession itself would be so common in their every-day life understanding
 - That it would become simply a backdrop to this story, serving to highlight what is truly exceptional and worth learning
- What they, and what we should hear, is not the circumstance in which the truth is learned
- But the truth itself
- That Jesus is able to speak to the chaos and fear in our lives
- That is what the demonic represents- the unknown, and the uncontrollable
- He is the unpredictable interruption in what is otherwise an orderly worship service occurring in a synagogue on the Sabbath
- And while you and I might have exercised demons from our theology, not believing in demons has hardly eradicated evil from our world.⁵
- We do still have many things which are beyond our control- forces that violate our sense of control, calm, security
- These are the same fears that these early believers had- that humanity shares, and to which this passage from Mark is speaking
- And what we learn from Jesus and his interaction with this possessed man is that God is able to walk with us through those times
- To speak peace to our souls as the storm rages around us.
- Another piece of truth that the ancient listener might have gathered from this pericope in Mark is that Jesus is not the first to speak peace to chaos
 - The same thing happened in their Scriptures, back in Genesis 1, when God spoke and created order out of the dark, watery chaos
 - Brought the universe into being
 - The same God who speaks to the Israelites in our reading from Deuteronomy this morning

⁵ Fred Craddock, quoted by Kathryn Matthews, http://www.ucc.org/worship_samuel_february_1_2015

- Promising to raise up a new prophet to carry on the tradition Moses has begun
- This reading we heard earlier is the beginning of the end for Moses
- After this, we have about twenty more chapters of laws Moses is relaying to the people
- And then it is Joshua who rises up to fill Moses shoes
- It is during this transition of leadership that I believe God is telling the people of Israel to have faith
- Not in the prophets themselves, even ones as great and faithful as Moses
- But in the God who calls them and the God they serve
- The covenant made with the people while Moses led them out of Egypt and through the wilderness
- Is not going to expire- God actually renews it toward the end of the book
- That even through what had to be one of the most difficult transitions of leadership ever known: from the revered Moses to Joshua
- God could even speak peace and calm during that time of what had to be great unrest and doubt
- When I read these and other passages like them from our Bible, more than finding it different from my world today
 - I usually find it very applicable
 - Although the context, culture, and time period in which we find ourselves has changed very rapidly
 - The nature of being human is still very similar
 - There's the fear of change, the unknown- that seems universal, doesn't it?
 - And for the Israelites that was centered firmly in Moses death and the transition of leadership
 - Then there is the demonic- or the potential disruption in our desperate attempt at order and civility
 - The uncontrollable chaos messing up our best attempts at control in our lives
 - It might be the loss of a job, the death of a loved one, the sudden medical tests and results, the large, unexpected financial expense
 - There has never been a shortage of the chaos that can disrupt us, not in Biblical times, not now
 - But most applicable today for you and me, from these two passages of Scripture, is that we see God and God's son facing it all head on

- Walking with us to the place where our fear runs deep, just below our carefully constructed sense of security
- Shining this divine light in the darkness of fear itself.
- Fear can be overwhelming and debilitating, both for us as individuals and as churches
- Tipping the scales and causing us to freeze, unwilling to risk and to reach out
- The Gospel, the good news, is that we have a God willing to go there with us
- The question, I think, for the ancient Israelites and for the early listeners hearing Mark's account of Jesus and the demonic
 - Is the same question for us: in what do we place our faith?
 - On what does our inner sense of calm and peace depend?
 - On what do we stand as we face into the chaos that our lives as human beings is subject to?
 - This past year, we have together as a church had to face some of this, of what can only be described as chaos
 - We have had illness, misinformation, death, and we have had some of the most basic pieces to our common identity interrupted
 - Like coffee hour. Oh yeah, and some other minor things like communion, and singing, and seeing each other smile
 - These pieces of our spiritual and communal life that are at the core of who we are together, they were temporarily taken away in some way
 - And we had to ask: in what do we place our faith? And how do we still be church when so much of what church meant was suspended
 - What I hope we have discovered is that while every aspect of our lives was somehow interrupted this year
 - God was still there, speaking peace, and exorcising the demons of chaos.
 - Still with us in the darkest of places,
 - And St. Michael's was still there praying, even over Facebook and Zoom
 - And as we begin to shift our focus to this coming year, we will continue to worship and pray in any way we can, because that is what it means to be a church
 - We will lean into an unknown future, but rely on our core values as a parish

- Over and Over again, we will ask ourselves, In what do we really place our faith?
- And over and over again we will answer, I believe in God, the Father Almighty, and his Son Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.