

January 31, 2021. Rev. Katheryn McGinnis

Words have power. The power to hurt. The power to heal and transform.

Right after I graduated college, I spent some time backpacking in New Zealand. And one day on the trails was a particularly long and difficult day – we had to hike about 20 miles with over 4000 feet of elevation gain. And while the views were stunning, by evening I was exhausted, my feet hurt – I could feel blisters forming – but I knew we still had hours to go.

Somewhere in the pain and exhaustion of it all, the hymn sanctuary popped into my head.

Lord prepare me, to be a sanctuary.

Pure and holy, tried, and true.

And with thanksgiving

I'll be a living sanctuary for you.

And one step after another, I just kept repeating those words over and over and over in my head until I got lost into the rhythm of it all. The weight of my throbbing feet seemed to subside and before I knew it – we arrived at camp and I had made it through.

The power of words takes center stage in today's scripture. It's important to know where in the gospel of Mark our scripture for today takes place. This story of Jesus teaching in the temple and then exorcising a demon – it takes place in chapter 1 of Mark's gospel. Mark's gospel opens with the proclamation of John the Baptist, then Jesus is baptized, goes into the wilderness to be tempted by Satan, and Jesus then gathered his disciples.

And then we get to our scripture today. This story marks the beginning of Jesus' public ministry. Imagine yourself reading or hearing the Gospel of Mark for the first time. The other gospels haven't been written yet – this is the first you are hearing about Jesus from Nazareth.

And the first story about Jesus going out in public and teaching – you hear this story about Jesus exorcising a demon, an unclean spirit, in the synagogue.

Now, I'll be the first to say, exorcism stories in the gospels, or really any part of scripture, make me a bit uneasy.

I don't really know what to do with exorcisms – I know that within Jesus' context, the worldview was quite different – divine intervention into human life was a common belief.

But where we are now – we have such a new understanding of illness – both physical and emotional, which can make it a bit difficult to relate to things like exorcisms.

But this story is at the very beginning of Mark – it begs to be known, it demands us to sit in that discomfort – and try and discern what Mark is saying about Christ.

And what Mark is saying is that Christ's words have authority. We know this at the beginning.

Verse 22 – “They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority”.

He teaches with authority and then a man with an unclean spirit enters the synagogue – and then the unclean spirit names Jesus – both as Jesus of Nazareth AND as the Holy one of God. There is power in words.

In what we say, and what we name. Naming someone or something gives you power.

In the culture of Jesus's time, “the one doing the naming had more authority than the one being named.” Just think back to Genesis when Adam names the animals and has authority over them.

But despite the demon, this unclean spirit who has possessed a man and names Jesus, Jesus, possessed with the spirit of God, overcomes. He speaks one sentence, and the unclean spirit is gone. His words have authority.

What are the demons that possess us today?

What unclean spirits do we bring into this very sanctuary, into our holy places of worship?

Nadia Bolz Webber is a Lutheran pastor who wrote about her longtime and ongoing experience with depression.

Her depression became such a constant companion in her life that she named her Francis.

She writes,

“I remembered that at one point it felt so much like my depression was a character in my life, that it actually felt really good to just go ahead and give her a name.”

Naming our demons is a way to recognize they exist. No longer can we sit in denial about the things that plague our lives, no. Naming them forces them into reality – and once things are real – we can see the damage done and then move forward towards healing.

Our demons might not be as dramatic as unclean spirits bursting into the synagogue – or maybe they are. They might be like Nadia’s: depression or anxiety or any those demons that plague our minds.

Then there are demons we all share because they plague our community: demons of racism, homophobia, sexism, classism, violence, systemic poverty, war, greed, unchecked capitalism, the list goes on.

But they all share a universal truth: naming them is the first step to casting them out.

We’ve seen that truth this past year. When it became clear that ignoring the pandemic would only result in unchecked destruction and loss of lives, naming the reality of covid 19 has helped us move forward.

When the effects of systemic racism and the violence on black bodies became viral this past summer, naming the origins of white supremacy and how it shaped our nation helped usher in the most diverse administration in United States history.

Naming them doesn’t solve everything. But it’s a start.

From there, we pray. We turn to the authority of Jesus, whose very words alone cast them out. Don’t underestimate the power of prayer.

As Osvaldo Vena writes, “*Praying* is not a pious resignation to God’s will, or an exercise that puts our minds at ease, but rather, that “intensely personal struggle within each disciple, and among us collectively, to resist the despair and distractions that cause us to practice unbelief, to abandon or avoid the way of Jesus.”³

In other words, it is the struggle to believe that change can really happen. A better world is possible.”

And this is what our scripture reminds us today: The power of God in Christ is stronger than the unclean spirits that plague our lives, our churches, our country, our world.

There have been countless times since that long and painful day backpacking in New Zealand that the lyrics of sanctuary have popped into my head. And I've repeated them over and over to get lost in the rhythm – to numb the pain – whatever it may be. And I think I continue to come back sanctuary because when I imagine becoming a living sanctuary, pure and holy, I imagine an emptying. A casting out of all that is un-pure and unholy.

Casting out my demons. Don't be afraid to name your demons. Name the unclean spirits that possess us. Both individually and systemically. Bring them into reality. For what we know is this: the one who is possessed by God, possessed by that Holy Spirit – we find healing in his authority.

Christ, through casting out that demon in the synagogue, the first story of public ministry – shows us the word of God speaks liberation. And for that – thanks be to god. Amen.