

Mark 1:21-45

Children's Sermon: Fizzy Water...power waiting to be released.

(shake up can of fizzy water)

What just happened inside this can of my favorite fizzy water? I wonder what it sounds like inside there

(act like I'm going to open it)

I wonder what would happen if I opened it? (let kids respond)

(put can to the side)

I bet Jesus knew something about this kind of power that is just waiting to be set free.

This was the first time we learn about Jesus performing a healing miracle. Do you remember what the man with demon said to Jesus as Jesus was teaching incredible things? He was afraid! He said, "What are you going to do to us?" Jesus could have been angry, or argued, or convinced him and the crowd that he was a good guy, but instead, Jesus knew right away what to do. He spoke right to that demon and told him to go away. Everyone was amazed.

Do you remember the fizzy water can? What is the water doing now? It is filled with carbonated, explosive water, just waiting to get out. Like Jesus, we are filled with the same power, the same courage, the same gift to heal and love others with the good news of Jesus.

(shake the can again)

Now it's up to us! What we decide to do next will determine what happens. If we open the can, we can set the power free! If we don't open it the soda inside will settle back down, and we may never know how close we could have come to do something amazing for God. What should we do?

(open the can and let our power out!)

Adult Sermon:

Unlike the other synoptic gospels that begin with the little baby Jesus, little boy Jesus, and slowly move into his public ministry, Mark takes off. Jesus hits the ground running. So far, he's been baptized, tested, and he's chosen disciples. Our text today has him casting out an unclean spirit, healing Simon's mother, praying in a deserted place, and cleansing a leper. That's a lot of activity in one chapter (24 verses).

(read scripture)

Demons...evil spirits...the devil. How do you feel when these words are mentioned? What emotions are stirred up within? Do you get uncomfortable with the idea? Do you immediately think of a story or experience that you have had? Do you think back to that house you grew up in that you swear had to be haunted? Do you embrace this spiritual warfare worldview? Or do you altogether dismiss that spiritual demons exist?

To be completely honest with you, I'm not even sure what I think of the whole demon-possessed idea, and in today's gospel reading, we hear quite a bit about it. I know evil exists, and I know the devil exists, but it's the spiritual realms...the spiritual warfare of it all and how exactly it all plays out that I'm just a bit unsure about. Do demons possess us today like we hear about so many times in the bible? Is the devil lurking? Are demons more subtle than they used to be? Maybe all of the above?! I think one thing that we can agree on is that there is

something...or somethingS - in our world that have a hold on us to make us broken and sinful people...to defray us from being the perfect people that God has created us to be.

In 2004, I had the opportunity to lead a group of college students on a mission trip to South Africa. One of the small villages we worked with while we were in South Africa was called Brandveli. And while we were there, we worked alongside of a full time missionary who lived in Capetown, which was a good 6 hour drive away.

This missionary had been working with Brandveli off and on for a few years. He had been trying to get a church started but really, his main focus was caring for the people and helping them in whatever way he could. Our missionary, Pierre, knew that the devil had a hold on this village. Men from this village would go to work during the week and come home on the weekends and drink so much that they would beat and rape their own children. Many children of the town would actually hide out in the field of tall grass on the weekends at night to avoid any harm. One night, our group left over 50 bag lunches filled with food for the children to eat and the next morning, all but 2 bags had been eaten.

Pierre also experienced something bad happening at his home every time he visited Brandveli. One time there was a fire in his kitchen, one time his little boy got very sick, one time his 2 dogs were found dead when he arrived home. Maybe it was a coincidence, but Pierre was convinced it was the devil trying to stop him from doing the work God was calling him to do with Brandveli.

One evening at our nightly devotions, Pierre was explaining to us the power that the Devil can have on our lives if we let him and explained a little bit further about his view of how demons have entered this village and continue to enter the people and make them live lives that are unworthy. He explained that on numerous occasions, he had seen demons enter people and control them...literally take over their bodies.

“While this is a huge issue”, Pierre noted that night, “we know that Christ has authority over demons and when we pray for the demons to leave in the name of Christ, they obey and they will leave.

Demons and unclean spirits are mentioned 7 times in our gospel reading for today. A man in a synogogue with an unclean spirit that Jesus rebuked and made clean. That evening, his disciples brought Jesus to all who were sick or possessed with demons. Jesus cast out many demons and “would not permit them to speak, because they knew him” as the scripture says.

I admit that sometimes I am a little skeptical of that “demons worldview”, but I’m not skeptical of being unclean. I see unclean spirits as forces that we don’t have control over...things that we can do nothing about. Greed. Racism. We can’t blame one person for these, but they always seem to be there. We can’t imagine one person coming in and speaking and racism or sexism or classism ending, it’s an injustice problem and we are unclean.

Or how about things that we personally can't control and that rip us apart? Eating disorders, alcoholism, the cycle of poverty, or bitterness. All of these things make us unclean people.

What is unclean in your life? Where do you feel isolated, ostracized, broken, or unclean? Perhaps these feelings come from your own sin, or sins of others against you. Perhaps these feelings just come from your specific life circumstances.

A leper approaches Jesus, asking to be made clean. (If you don't know, Lepers were considered dirty...contagious...unclean and they were ostracized from their families and their towns because of their "illness" that they had). Jesus, moved with compassion, cleanses him with a touch. Jesus comes in and speaks and makes those spirits or those forces go away. Jesus the King meets us right where we are and comes to restore us physically, emotionally, and spiritually. Whether it's actual demons that are within you, or the unclean lives that we lead. Jesus has come to restore it all.

This authority of Christ is a word of hope. This authority of Christ is a word of Promise.

In the name of Christ, God has promised to cleanse us...to restore us...to be with us...to love us...no matter what! No matter what....

In places of isolation and brokenness, God's desire for you is to be brought home, to be restored, and to be made clean. Do you believe that?

At the end of our scripture reading for today, Jesus tells the leper, whom he had just healed and made clean – to tell nothing to anyone about what he had just done. Does the leper listen? Of course not.

These healings that Jesus performs are the actual gospel. These healings are the good news. This is what it looks like when God shows up in our midst...people are healed and communities are brought back together. I'm not sure I'd be able to keep that a secret either!

Here we are, the 1st weekend in January, and there's lots of hub-bub about New Year's resolutions. Have you made yours yet? Maybe this year, we need to resolve to believe in the truth that we are just real people with real problems who are finding a healing and a peace and renewed purpose with the authority that Jesus Christ, our Savior, has on our lives.

May we live out that mission this day forward. Thanks be to God.

Amen.