

## **Mark 1: 21-28**

**A PASTOR I USED TO SERVE WITH BEGAN HER SERMONS WITH THE WORDS: “STARTLE US, O GOD.” AS YOU MIGHT EXPECT THE PRAYER RECEIVED MIXED REVIEWS. SOME OF THE PARISHONERS LIKED IT AND TOLD HER THEY MISSED IT WHEN SHE DIDN’T PRAY IT. OTHERS COMPLAINED THEY HAD BEEN “STARTLED” ENOUGH ALL WEEK LONG, AND DIDN’T NEED TO BE STARTLED IN CHURCH THANK YOU VERY MUCH. THE MIXED REVIEWS PASTORS HEAR ON PRAYER IS MORE COMMON THAN YOU MIGHT THINK!**

**WHAT ABOUT YOU? WHEN YOU COME TO WORSHIP DO YOU SEEK TO BE STARTLED OR COMFORTED? MAYBE INSPIRED OR CHALLENGED, CERTAINLY NOT BORED. REMEMBER I HAVE 5 CHILDREN WHO TOLD ME OFTEN CHURCH WAS THE MOST BORING THING IN THE ENTIRE WORLD.**

**THE LATE JOHN UPKIDE ONCE WROTE: “WHATEVER ELSE GOD MAY BE, GOD SHOULD NOT BE UNINTERESTING” HE WAS RIGHT. IF YOU READ THE BIBLE, GOD IS NOT BORING. GOD IN THE BIBLE ACTS IN WAYS THAT STARTLE PEOPLE, FROM THE CREATION TO THE RESURRECTION, TO THE BUILDING OF THE CHURCH AT PENTECOST, THROUGH THE SPREAD OF THE GOSPEL, TURNING THE WORLD UPSIDE DOWN.**

**PERSONALLY, I LIKE THE PRAYER, “STARTLE US, O GOD,” BECAUSE IF THE TRUTH BE TOLD, THE CAPACITY TO BE STARTLED, SURPRISED, ASTONISHED HAS BECOME DIMINISHED IN US. WE ARE SO PREOCCUPIED WITH OUR LIVES, OUR LIST OF THINGS TO ACCOMPLISH, PEOPLE TO SEE, PLACES TO GO, CALLS TO MAKE, THAT WE SHUT OUT THE CAPACITY TO BE STARTLED, ASTONISHED. OUR PRACTICE OF FAITH HAS BECOME PREDICTABLE AND ROUTINE. BORING PERHAPS?**

**WRITER ANNIE DILLARD SAYS, “WHEN YOU COME TO CHURCH YOU SHOULD EXPECT TO BE STARTLED, THEY SHOULD ISSUE SEAT BELTS WHEN YOU WALK IN. YOU SHOULD ALSO RECEIVE CRASH HELMETS IF YOU ARE REALLY LISTENING AND PAYING ATTENTION TO THE GOSPEL.”**

**WHEN WAS THE LAST TIME JESUS ASTOUNDED AND AMAZED YOU? CAN YOU RECALL A TIME IN THE RECENT PAST WHEN THE PRESENCE OF GOD IN YOUR LIFE CAUGHT YOUR ATTENTION AND HELD IT? WHEN A SACRED MOMENT, ENCOUNTER, WORD, IMAGE, OR EXPERIENCE BROUGHT YOU TO YOUR KNEES?**

**I ONLY ASK BECAUSE IT’S THE END OF JANUARY, MANY OF US ARE WEARY OF WINTER AND COLD. OTHERS OF US MAY BE BORED WITH THE ROUTINESS OF OUR LIVES.**

WHERE IN THE MIDST OF OUR DAILY ROUTINES, MIGHT WE EXPERIENCE AWE? WONDER? ASTONISHMENT? SURPRISE? WHERE IS THE VOICE OF AUTHORITY, POWER, GRACE, AND HEALING THAT CAN SNAP US BACK INTO FULL AND VIBRANT LIVING, NOW?

WE MUST NOTE WITH SERIOUSNESS THE PROMINENCE OF HEALING IN JESUS' MINISTRY. MARK, MORE THAN ANY OTHER GOSPEL WRITER, EMPHASIZES JESUS' MIRACULOUS POWER TO HEAL. OF THE EIGHTEEN MIRACLES RECORDED IN MARK, THIRTEEN HAVE TO DO WITH HEALING, AND FOUR OF THE THIRTEEN ARE EXORCISMS.

JESUS HAS GONE TO THE SYNAGOGUE TO TEACH AND THERE WAS A MAN WITH AN UNCLEAN SPIRIT WHO INTERRUPTS TO CHALLENGE JESUS AS ONE WHO HAS COME TO DESTROY. THEN JESUS CALLS THE SPIRIT OUT OF THE MAN, AND ALL WHO WERE PRESENT WERE AMAZED! THE UNCLEAN SPIRIT RECOGNIZES THE HOLY ONE BEFORE ANYONE ELSE DOES.

THE DEMON GOT IT---HE CALLED OUT: "JESUS OF NAZARETH, THE HOLY ONE OF GOD."

SOMETIMES OUR "UNCLEAN SPIRITS" TAKE UP RESIDENCE IN OUR HOLY PLACES. THAT IS, WE CARRY OUR DESTRUCTIVE HABITS AND TENDENCIES RIGHT INTO CHURCH, OUR FRIENDSHIPS, OUR FAMILIES, AND OUR WORKPLACES. SOMETIMES OUR DEMONS...OUR FEARS, OUR ADDICTIONS, OUR SINS, AND OUR COMPULSIONS, RECOGNIZE JESUS FIRST BECAUSE THEY KNOW THAT AN ENCOUNTER WITH HIM WILL CHANGE EVERYTHING.

WHAT WREAKS HAVOC IN OUR HEARTS AND MINDS? WHAT DISTORTS OUR HUMANITY? THESE FORCES MIGHT NOT LEAVE OUR LIVES WITHOUT A FIGHT, BUT THE JESUS OF MARK'S GOSPEL WILL DO BATTLE FOR US IF WE'LL LET HIM. BUT WILL WE?

I WAS ASKED ONE TIME TO PERFORM AN EXORCISM OF A SORT. I WAS SERVING A HISTORIC OLD CHURCH IN DOWNTOWN MINNEAPOLIS. ABOUT TEN DAYS BEFORE CHRISTMAS, THE OFFICE ADMINISTRATOR BUZZED MY OFFICE TO SAY, "THERE IS A YOUNG MAN HERE TO SEE YOU. HE SAYS HE WANTS YOU TO BLESS HIM... HE'S NOT A MEMBER HERE...SAYS HE JUST WANTS YOU TO BLESS HIM." WELL, I HAD MY SUSPICIONS WHAT THAT MEANT. DID HE NEED MONEY AS IT WAS CHRISTMAS? GAS MONEY PERHAPS TO TRAVEL FOR THE HOLIDAYS? SINCE THE DIGNITY CENTER...OUR EMERGENCY RELIEF MINISTRY WAS CLOSED FOR THE DAY, I SAID, "SURE, SHOW HIM IN." HE WAS NOT WHAT I EXPECTED. HE WAS NEATLY DRESSED, CLEAN-SHAVEN, LATE 20'S...I GUESSED. THERE WAS AN AIR OF DIGNITY ABOUT HIM, NO SAD LOOK IN HIS EYE, NONE OF THE USUAL SIGNS OF HAVING BEEN ON THE STREET.

HE APOLOGIZED FOR TAKING UP MY TIME BUT EXPLAINED HE JUST WANTED A BLESSING. HE WENT ON TO EXPLAIN IN A VERY ARTICULATE WAY THAT HE HAD THIS "DEVIL ON HIS BACK" THAT HE COULD NOT SHAKE. AS MUCH AS HE HAD TRIED, HE COULD NOT GET RID OF IT, AND HE THOUGHT THAT IF HE COULD JUST FIND A PASTOR WHO WOULD BLESS HIM, THE DEVIL WOULD GO AWAY. HE DID NOT SEEM DEPRESSED OR OVERLY DESPERATE, IN FACT, HE

APPEARED IN PRETTY GOOD SPIRITS, VERY MUCH IN CONTROL. SO I MADE SOME FEABLE ATTEMPT TO EXPLAIN THAT UNITED METHODISTS WERE NOT USUALLY IN THE PRACTICE OF CASTING OUT DEVILS. I TRIED TO EXPLAIN THAT I REALLY HAD NOT BEEN GIVEN THAT KIND OF POWER TO PERFORM EXORCISMS AND THAT WAS SOMETHING I DIDN'T LEARN HOW TO DO IN SEMINARY...YET I FELT LIKE EVERYTHING I SAID WAS NOT APPROPRIATE IN THE MOMENT. HE HAD NOT COME FOR A LESSON ON THE STUDY AND MY PASTORAL AUTHORITY AND DUTIES.

HE POLITELY EXPLAINED AGAIN THAT ALL HE WANTED WAS A BLESSING.

WELL, IT WAS CHRISTMAS I THOUGHT SO I ASKED HIS NAME.

HE SAID IT WAS TYLER AND WITH THAT TYLER KNELT DOWN IN MY OFFICE WHILE I HAD A PRAYER. I THANKED GOD FOR HIS PRESENCE IN TYLER'S LIFE; ACKNOWLEDGING THE WAYS GOD HAD ALREADY BLESSED HIM, THEN I PRAYED THAT JESUS WOULD REVEAL HIS PURPOSE FOR HIM AND THAT JESUS WOULD TAKE AWAY THIS DEVIL THAT WAS PREVENTING TYLER FROM BEING THE KIND OF PERSON GOD INTENDED HIM TO BE. WITH MY AMEN, TYLER STOOD, SMILED, SHOOK MY HAND AND SAID, "THANKS." THEN HE LEFT. NOT A WORD ABOUT MONEY OR A MEAL OR A PLACE TO STAY. "ALL I WANT IS YOUR BLESSING," WERE THE ONLY WORDS HE SHARED.

I WAS ASTONISHED AND IN AWE. ASHAMED OF ASSUMPTIONS I HAD MADE BEFORE MEETING A YOUNG MAN WHO TRUSTED IN THE POWER OF A BLESSING TO DISARM AN UNCLEAR SPIRIT IN HIS LIFE.

CONSIDER THE QUESTION THE SPIRIT ASKED BEFORE IT LEFT ITS VICTIM IN OUR STORY FROM MARK: "WHAT HAVE YOU TO DO WITH US, JESUS OF NAZARETH?" THERE'S ONLY ONE ANSWER TO THAT QUESTION. *EVERYTHING. I HAVE EVERYTHING TO DO WITH YOU.* WHEREVER PAIN IS, DARKNESS IS, TORMENT IS, GOD IS. GOD HAS EVERYTHING TO DO WITH US, EVEN AND MAYBE ESPECIALLY WHEN WE'RE AT OUR WORST. WHEN THE SHADOWS OVERWHELM US, WHEN THE DEMONS SHRIEK THE LOUDEST, WHEN THE HOPE OF ANY HEALING FEELS LIKE NOTHING MORE THAN A FANTASY, THAT IS WHEN JESUS'S AUTHORITY BRINGS THE WALLS DOWN AND HEALS.

MY PRAYER IS FOR EACH OF US TO EXPERIENCE HOLY AMAZEMENT. I PRAY THAT LIKE THE MAN WITH THE UNCLEAR SPIRIT IN OUR GOSPEL LESSON, WE WILL SURRENDER TO FREEDOM WHEN JESUS OFFERS IT. IT'S OKAY TO SURRENDER AND ASK FOR A BLESSING. I KNOW BECAUSE A YOUNG MAN NAMED TYLER TAUGHT ME.