

“Possessed”
Mark 1:21-28

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One of the many things I love about Edgewood is that we are a Christian church filled with many beliefs. We are people who have grown up in different faith traditions, from Catholic to Charismatic and from Methodist to Mennonite. Some of us even grew up in the United Church of Christ, or the Congregational and Evangelical Reformed churches that preceded our denomination, and some of us even grew up right here at Edgewood. Some of us are people who grew up with no formal religious tradition in our home, receiving language to match our experiences of God later in life and learning the stories of Jesus as an adult. Some of us are people who have daily prayer practices and read devotionals and theologians on our own, while others save this for Sunday mornings.

There is no one right path to Edgewood and we celebrate the diversity of faith backgrounds and beliefs among us. We share common faith values, like our commitment to justice and a belief that God is still at work in the world, but part of the opportunity in belonging to *this* church is the ability to be able to discuss, wrestle, explore what we believe and why. As your pastor and resident preacher I am often aware of the ways I am called to hold the center of our shared faith up for us to see while providing entry points for us each of us to dig deeper into our personal beliefs and perhaps try on new language or imagery that speaks to our experiences of the sacred.

In this way, this recognition that we are calling coming together with different backgrounds, expectations, and hopes, we are not so different from the people who encounter Jesus in the gospels. The four Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John tell the story of Jesus' life, but they do so through the lens of all the diverse people who encountered him.

There are tradesmen who become devoted followers and radically change their lives once they meet Jesus. There are people who are defined by their professional and public role, such as scribe or priest or money changer, whose experience of Jesus' preaching is from the perspective of those roles. There are others who meet Jesus who we only know because of their status like being a woman or a child or being poor, and others because of their affliction or illness. Each of these types of people has a different experience of Jesus and walks away with a different understanding of who he is, what his ministry is, and what his connection to God might be.

In today's story we see two different perspectives unfolding. There is a group of people in the synagogue, so we can assume they would have had the same Jewish religious background as Jesus did. They spoke the same language, they had the same traditions and understanding of God. They are not put off by Jesus teaching them, but are surprised to realize that his teaching is different from the scribes that come to the synagogue, he teaches "as one having authority." This means that they would have experienced in Jesus' words a direct connection to and from God, rather than the scribes who taught by quoting other priests and prophets. Jesus speaks from within himself, from God within, revealing to the onlookers something powerful and prophetic before them.

But there was one among the people in the gathering that day that had a different perspective on who Jesus was. There was a man who is described as having an unclean

spirit. There are different ways we could characterize this man, our different faith traditions might have once said he was possessed by an evil while others would balk at that description, some might attribute it to a mental illness or some un-ease in his mind that set him apart from the others, but others of us would balk at mental illness and possession being used to describe the same person.

I wonder if in our Edgewood faith context we might better understand this man to be one that is possessed with something that harms him, be it an idea or an outlook or a way at looking at the world. Perhaps we better understand possession to be what happens when people uphold sexism or racism or classism at the expense of our own humanity. Or when we hold onto harmful ideas like not believing we are worthy of love or forgiveness or healing.

Whatever our way of interpreting it, this is a man who is unwell and is set apart from the other bystanders. Instead of absorbing Jesus' teachings, he challenges him saying, "Have you come to destroy us?!" Jesus rebukes him and separates the man from whatever is possessing him. That is, offered healing. That is, allowed the person to be seen before whatever was ailing him, That is, said I will not compromise or seek unity with something that is destroying this man's humanity or harming his wellbeing.

Everyone present was a witness to this moment of healing transformation, but there was a difference in what happened as they left. Yes, many were amazed. Yes, Jesus' fame began to spread meaning they talked with their friends and shared their experience

and started passing on the story of that day. But one person left transformed. One person did not just witness Jesus's sacred power at work, but they experienced it for themselves.

I wonder about this difference between witnessing or hearing about something transformative, and experiencing it for ourselves. I wonder about this difference between listening to Jesus talk about how God's love can free us from harm and experiencing the liberating power of God's love for ourselves. I wonder what it takes to move from learning about something to experiencing it.

One thing we know about that man, with whatever was harming him, whatever forces of were possessing him that day, he came with his full, flawed, pained self before Jesus. He did not hide his demons. He did not shirk. He cried out from his pain and Jesus responded just as fully. Part of the healing came from the man allowing himself to be seen. To cry out. To confront Jesus and say, "What are you doing here? What do you have to offer someone like me?" And Jesus looked at this man's demons and said, "Come out of him!" He knew this man could not live fully if. He was clinging to the things that kept him separate from God's love.

Today we are just shy of three weeks away from the season of Lent in the Christian church. This is a season of deep reflection, a period of 40 days representing the 40 days Jesus spent in the wilderness. These 40 days take us to Holy Week and to Easter, and so we use this as a season of preparation, of prayer, of ridding ourselves of the things or thing that keeps us separate from God's love or separate from the fullness of our

humanity. Sometimes we think of giving up things like chocolate because every time we reach for the m&ms and hold back, we are reminded of God.

This year though I would invite us to approach Lent differently. Instead of learning about God or Jesus or learning about prayer, I want to encourage us to open ourselves to an experience of God, to open ourselves to the kinds of healing transformation that the Gospels explore, that our story unearthed, that we long for in our lives.

I am sharing these Lenten hopes now so that we can take a few weeks to identify what it is that is possessing us, so to speak, and how we might open ourselves to an experience of God in Lent to free ourselves from that harm or pain. And you don't have to do this on your own - I'm literally your in-house resource with ideas and guides and books and resources to send you on your way. Use me. Email me. Put me to work.

The first step is identifying what is it that is possessing you and keeping you separate from your humanity. Is it a clinging to a culture of white supremacy or to patriarchy or to the idea that one group of people are better than another? Is it shame or guilt or fear or doubt? Is it the belief that everyone has it more together than you do or the quest for perfectionism or a nagging voice in your head saying you will never be good enough? What possesses you and stops you short from receiving and giving love? From letting your light shine? From following God's call for you?

We've all got something. Most of us have a few somethings. I've got a whole list. You don't have to start with the hardest one. Just pick one. Something you are longing to

free yourself from. Something you would like to turn over to prayer and to God and to experience a life on the other side of it.

And once you name what that thing is, how will you go about the business of freeing yourself? Is it a prayer practice you might pick up that points you in another way? Is it a practicing of writing and reflection, of excavating your story so that it can be placed somewhere outside of yourself? Is it a daily or weekly reading? Is there someone you can be accountable to or who is on a similar journey?

Our church is made of many histories, many religious paths, many spiritual interpretations. But we all came to Edgewood longing for something. Often that something is for connection with something bigger than ourselves, something kind of like God. Or to live a fully, authentic life. Or to immerse ourselves in justice and service and love. In this longing I invite us to remember Jesus not just as a teacher or a prophet but as a healer. A healer who welcomes all to bring their full, broken, messy selves before him and say, “Here I am. I am longing for love. I am longing for transformation. I am longing for wholeness.” This Lent, may we hold this healer a little closer and wonder anew what wholeness and transformation and love might look like if we are willing to give up that which harms us, possesses us, and keeps us from seeing God beside us, among us, and inside us. May it be so. Amen.