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Mark 1:21-28 Matins, January 28, 2018

In the most famous episode in **Heart of Darkness**, writer Joseph Conrad's 1899 novella about an unforgettable voyage up the Congo River in colonial Africa, Kurtz, a brutal ivory trader who has inflicted great suffering on his black workers, lies on his deathbed shouting, the horror! The horror! (The horror is his horrified sense of remorse.)

In a bleak 20th-century play called *The Chairs* by French dramatist Eugene Ionesco, an elderly couple live alone on a small island. They spend the time span of the plot waiting for someone with a message which will impart to them the meaning of life. They shift on their chairs and wait, while sharks swim back and forth around their island. At the end of the play the messenger comes onstage in black tie and unrolls a script on which is written the meaning of life. He mumbles "ummmm" and other unintelligible noises, and he walks off. The robot-like deficiencies of the characters, the stage littered with rotting things, deliberate non sequiturs: this is not anyone's idea of hope. It is easy to cite examples, in literature and in life, of evidence of despair, dereliction and the powers of darkness. One only read a newspaper, or try to watch the news.

Today's gospel reading is about demon possession, another of the powers of darkness. I find it fascinating that the exorcism of an unclean spirit is the first act of Jesus's public ministry. Indeed, healing and exorcism often seemed linked in Jesus' healing stories. Theologian Karl Barth called some of these demon stories "burlesque," the demons more ridiculous than frightening. I believe he was thinking of another story, the one with the herd of squealing pigs in a panic.

It is after Jesus' wilderness confrontation with Satan that he goes to a worship space, the synagogue, in Capernaum. While Jesus is teaching, a man with an evil spirit cannot stand it anymore. "What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Let us alone! Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are: the Holy One of God." The text is plural, "leave us alone." The demon challenges Jesus' authority: "**Why do you interfere with us?**" or "**mind your own business.**" The demons are confrontational, assertive: they certainly knew who Jesus is. Jesus commands the spirit to "be muzzled", to be silent, and come out of the man. No one appears to have asked Jesus to get involved. Onlookers are astonished. According to the gospels, Jesus performed sixteen healing miracles. Mark records ten consecutive incidents at the beginning of his gospel. These healing stories are intended to be seen as signs that the reign of God was and is present.

Exorcism was not unusual in Jesus' day. Jewish exorcists used prayers, incantations, medical preparations or stones with special qualities, to drive out demons. Yet we Christians often don't quite know what to do with stories about demon possession. Demons,

powers and principalities, spiritual warfare, demonic forces seem like a foreign language to us. American Lutheran pastor and writer Nadia Bolz-Webber put it well: "Like a good middle-class, mainline Protestant I tend to look down my theological nose at demons as superstitious, snake-handling stuff, the embarrassing spiritual equivalent to a monster truck rally."

A number of biblical scholars suggest that these demon-possession stories are a quite natural, pre-scientific explanation of things that have not yet been elucidated by science: mental distress, oppression, anxiety, fear, anger, disorientation, possession, bondage. People then and now battle things that are deep and ferocious. Perhaps such things can only be comprehended as unclean, evil spirits. We could add to the list many things from our day: the compulsion to abuse animals or people, the compulsion to abuse one's body through drugs, alcohol, gluttony, involvement in the occult, fortune-telling, satanism, psychological disorders, split and multiple personalities, paranoia, perhaps the cry of the unshaven, homeless person on the corner. Maybe we secretly look down on people who smoke or spend too much on scratch tickets. Historians speak about **presentism**, an uncritical adherence to present-day attitudes; the tendency to interpret past events in terms of our contemporary values and concepts. Modern ideas cannot be retrofitted onto the past. That is not fair to the past! C.S. Lewis once wrote: "It is dangerous to deny the existence of the powers of darkness. On the other hand, the other danger is to have an unhealthy interest in them, and in so doing, give them more power than they have, or should have." So what to do?

Every era has its understanding of the causes of diseases and their cures. Ancient people did not focus on viruses, germs and environmental factors. In the world of the New Testament, there was a preoccupation with blindness, lameness, leprosy. That generation believed that "sin," "demons" and "evil spirits" caused diseases, disability, mental illness, antisocial behavior. Demons compelled their human hosts to suffer physically and spiritually. Jesus himself did not put a lot of stock in Jewish purity [laws](#). He freely touched people who were "unclean," in ritual terms, including [lepers](#), and he healed them. We understand this healing as a sign that the reign of God was present then, and, we believe, remains with us in our day of heart disease, cancers, addictions of various kinds. Thirty years ago AIDS was on everyone's lips.

This gospel story is about the power of God! No evil can withstand the power of God. There are forces that seek to defy God in our world and in our lives. Inside of us, outside us. Perhaps actual demons, perhaps our human darkness. Jesus clearly engaged the powers and principalities in his ministry. The writer to the Ephesians: "For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places." St. Paul reminded the Colossian Christians that when Christ died for humankind, he disarmed the principalities

and powers. (*Col 2:13*) The powers of darkness have been dealt a mortal blow. That's the spiritual equivalent of Charlie Bucket, who, in **Charlie and the Chocolate Factory**, finds the golden ticket in his Wonka bar.

We know that God has named us and claimed us as God's own. Writer Nadia Bolz-Weber writes in her book, **Accidental Saints**: "what makes us the saints of God is not our ability to be saintly but rather God's ability to work through sinners. The title "saint" is always conferred, never earned. Or as the good Saint Paul puts it, "For it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure" (*Philippians 2:13*). Jesus conquered the powers, liberated humankind to live in wholeness of mind and spirit. May we be freed from our demons and follow Jesus, the Christ. And in that liberation we bear witness to God's power.

And with one another we can certainly practice what the late Henri Nouwen called the "ministry of presence." By being present to one another we can be a reminder not of darkness or discouragement or disfunction, but of the love and grace of God. Our hymn of response is Spirit of the Living God, fall afresh on me. That is the good news of the gospel. May it be so. Amen.