

January 28 2018 (Mandy Witmer) Sermon

Mark 1:21-28 – Unclean Spirits, Exorcism and Opposition in Jesus' Mission

[21] They went to Capernaum; and when the Sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught. [22] They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes. [23] Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit [24] and he cried out, "What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God." [25] But Jesus rebuked him, saying, "Be silent, and come out of him." [26] And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him. [27] They were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, "What is this? A new teaching—with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him." [28] At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee (Mark 1:21-28).

Overview of Sermon

I want to focus on 4 main points in relation to this passage today:

- 1) First, I want to discuss Exorcism in Jesus' mission as a whole, and how it fits into Mark's larger narrative
- 2) Second, I want to spend some situating Jesus' public mission geographically.
- 3) Third, I will look more closely at the exorcism itself
- 4) Fourth, I would like to discuss some of the different kinds of responses to Jesus' exorcisms, and in particular, how his actions provoked controversy among his opponents.
- 5) I will conclude with some observations and comments about Jesus' exorcisms

1) Confronting Unclean Spirits as Central part of Jesus' mission

-It is now acknowledged by the vast majority of historical Jesus scholars that Healing and Exorcism are among the most certain features of Jesus' historical mission. In other words, although we may not fully understand what is happening

with these exorcisms or what was going on with those who were thought to be possessed by unclean spirits, we can be fairly certain that Jesus was seen by his contemporaries—both his supporters and his opponents—as an exorcist and a healer.

Why do I say this? What is some of the evidence we have?

First, Mary Magdalene, who was one of Jesus' closest followers, is described in Luke 8:2 as one from whom Jesus had removed 7 demons

In Luke 8:1-3, as part of a description of the way Jesus' travelling mission functioned, Luke says the following:

Soon afterwards he went on through cities and villages, proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God. The twelve were with him, as well as some women who had been cured of evil spirits and infirmities: Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, and Joanna, the wife of Herod [Antipas'] steward Chuza, and Susanna, and many others, who provided for them out of their resources.

As it turns out, not only Mary, but some of the other women who supported Jesus financially and apparently travelled with him (including Joanna, Susanna) had also been healed of diseases and had evil spirits removed.

This suggests that some of Jesus' followers and supporters became involved because of being freed from demons or illnesses. Interestingly, we know that women across cultures are at least twice as likely to experience spirit possession as men.

While tradition and art has often portrayed Mary Magdalene as a prostitute, there is actually no evidence of this in the gospels. Rather, Mary—a central figure in the gospels, who is placed first at the empty tomb, ahead of the male disciples in all four gospel accounts—is described here as one who had been previously possessed by demons, and one who was likely of some means, as were several other women who supported Jesus financially.

The criterion of embarrassment applies here. This criterion argues that if something in the gospels would be potentially embarrassing to the early Christian

community it is more likely to be historical. So, here one would have to ask why anyone would want to invent a story about Mary Magdalene – a major figure in the gospels and the early Christian movement – being possessed by demons if this were not the case?

Second, the tradition that Jesus cast out unclean spirits is found in both multiple independent sources (Mark, Q, Matthew's source and Luke's source) and in multiple forms (sayings, narratives and controversy stories).

We also have a combination of **first-hand accounts**, such as this account of an exorcism in the Capernaum Synagogue and the exorcism of the boy with the spirit in Mark 9 and **indirect references** to Jesus' role as an exorcist, of which this reference to Mary Magdalene's possession by 7 demons is only one example.

Before moving on, let's briefly think about spirit possession. What is it? There are many ways of approaching this question. In my own research on spirit possession and exorcism in the gospels, I used an anthropological and socio-political approach. Using this approach, spirit possession can be understood as an **idiom of distress** – a symbol or expression of pain, which both comments on and reflects the reality experienced by that person or their larger community.

'Unclean spirit,' the term used most often by the writer of Mark, seems to be a particularly Jewish way of understanding this phenomenon, whereby possession by these spirits reflects in part the crossing of boundaries in day to day life experienced by Jewish Palestinians living under Roman rule.

2) Situating the Passage in Mark

Let's now look at how the story is situated within Mark's gospel:

-In Mark's gospel, which is viewed by the vast majority of scholars as the earliest gospel, written around 70 CE, the same year the Jerusalem temple fell to the Roman armies, this exorcism is presented as the first action of Jesus public mission and comes immediately after his 40 days of testing in the wilderness and his recruitment of Simon, Andrew, James and John as disciples.

This indicates the level of importance the author of Mark places on exorcism within Jesus' overall mission.

-After Jesus is baptized by John, the author of Mark tells us in 1:12 that the spirit **drove** him into the wilderness where he was tested for 40 days where he was tested (*peirazo* – means to put to the test, try)

-Note that Jesus – like healers in all cultures-- needed to face his own adversary/demon before he was ready to heal others. He had to struggle.

The wounded healer...

Immediately **after** this exorcism in Mark, we are told that Jesus heals Simon's mother-in-law of a fever, and then at sundown all of the sick and those possessed by demons were brought to Jesus and that he cured many with various diseases and cast out many demons. Mark adds that Jesus would not allow the demons to speak because they knew him.

So, although teaching is obviously central to Jesus' mission, Mark begins Jesus' public mission with exorcism and healing.

3) Capernaum as the Central Hub of Jesus' Public Mission/Activity

Let's turn now to the location of the exorcism. Let's start with getting oriented on the map.

As has been said already, this exorcism occurs in Capernaum, which was the Centre of Jesus' mission. Both Mark and Matthew identify Capernaum as Jesus' home.

– use pointer to highlight Region of Galilee, Nazareth, Capernaum, Lake,

Point to: Capernaum, Nazareth, Bethsaida Julias and Chorizan, Caesarea Philippi, Decapolis/Gerasa,

In Matthew's introduction of Jesus' public mission in 4:13 he writes:

“Now when Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee. He left Nazareth and made his home in **Capernaum** by the Sea (Lake).”

John 3:23 says that John was baptizing at **Salim** because of the abundance of water there, but the other gospels don't specify the location.

Mark says in 2:1 – “When he [Jesus] returned to **Capernaum** after some days, it was reported that he was ‘**at home.**’ ”

Both Matthew and Luke identify **Capernaum**, along with **Bethsaida and Chorazin**, as communities which will be judged more harshly because of their failure to respond to Jesus' ‘**deeds of power**’ (Luke 10:13-15).

John independently identifies **Capernaum** as Jesus' home base in Galilee in 2:12, and in 6:59 places Jesus' discourse on the bread of life in the synagogue in Capernaum. John's placement of Jesus in Capernaum is particularly significant since his focus otherwise is on Judea and Jerusalem.

In Luke 4, after reading from the scroll of Isaiah, Jesus receives a less than enthusiastic response from the hometown crowd gathered at the **Nazareth** synagogue, because he implies that he is the anointed one who will bring release to the captive and sight to the blind.

Part of his response to his hometown crowd is the following:

“Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, ‘Doctor, cure yourself,’ and you will say also ‘Do here in your hometown the things that we have heard you did at **Capernaum.**’” (Luke 4:23)

This comment suggests several things:

This is interesting since it indicates that Jesus was not accepted in his hometown, that he must have had some kind of infirmity or disability that was obvious to those around him and which he had not managed to heal (thus the ‘Doctor, cure yourself’ comment), and it indicates that people in Nazareth had heard about what he had done in Capernaum.

Other stories and events recorded in the gospels are situated in the region surrounding Capernaum, near the northern end of the **Lake of Genesserat** or Sea of Galilee. [Note that it is not technically a sea but rather an inland lake].

Capernaum [pointer] itself is close to the lake and to the border between Galilee and Pania, where Jesus is reported to have spent much of his time. For example, the passage referred to as ‘The Confession or Revelation at **Caesarea Philippi**’ found in Mark 8 and Matthew 16, and in Mark’s version, where Peter objects to Jesus’ assertion that he must die and Jesus calls Peter Satan, is set there.

According to John’s gospel, **Bethsaida Julias**, which was located just a few miles northwest of Capernaum, across the border in Pania (John 1:44), was the hometown of Philip, Andrew and Peter.

Finally, the exorcism of the **Gerasene Demoniac** found in Mark 5 is set in the **Decapolis**, just across the lake and to the south of Capernaum.

Regardless of whether every incident is historical, what this gives us is a kind of geographic snapshot of where Jesus likely spent most of his time.

Slide 2 - Map of Political /Geographic Borders

Why might Jesus have set up in Capernaum and spent so much time moving around the border regions?

One of the reasons is suggested by Matthew’s reference in 4:13 that Jesus withdrew to Galilee when John was arrested. Is it possible that Jesus felt more secure living at the frontier of Galilee?

Point out each region and explain who ruled it.

Note that these were sons of Herod the Great. During Jesus’ lifetime it was Antipas who was the ruler of Galilee, and who put John the Baptist to death.

Is this one of the reasons that Jesus chose to locate his mission at Capernaum. It was 5 miles from the border with Pania, which was ruled by Antipas’ brother Philip. It would be easy to get into a boat and slip away or slip across the border. At any rate, it seems clear that Jesus spent much time in these border regions and moved back and forth across the borders.

4) The Exorcism in the Synagogue

Back to the passage: A few observations...

Mark tells us that the man with the unclean spirit cried out, “What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God.”] But Jesus rebuked him, saying, “Be silent, and come out of him.” [26] And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him

This passage reflects several aspects of Jesus’ mission and of also some of the narrative techniques used by the writer of Mark.

First, more than the other gospel writers, Mark tends to portray the disciples as a bit dense and unaware of what is going on and of Jesus’ identity, which is only revealed later in the gospel. An example of this is when the disciples don’t understand the meaning of the parable of the sower and Jesus must explain it to them in Mark 4 and their confusion over Jesus’ comments about the yeast of the Pharisees in ch. 8, which the disciples interpret to mean that Jesus is upset because they have forgotten to bring bread.

Ironically, in Mark’s gospel it is the demons, who know who Jesus is and what he is up to. Those who should know – Jesus’ disciples, do not. However, the unclean spirits know who Jesus is and here identify him by his hometown, **Nazareth**, and then by the title **‘the holy one of God.**

Both are unusual and occur rarely in the Gospels. The title “Jesus of Nazareth” is used only 3 times in the New Testament. In addition to this time, it is found also in Matthew 21:11, when Jesus rides into Jerusalem, and in Acts 10:38 as part of Peter’s speech to the God-fearer, Cornelius and his relatives and close friends.

This is the **only time** in the gospels that Jesus is addressed as “Jesus of Nazareth”.

The identification of Jesus by his hometown rather than by a Christological title, such as “Jesus Christ” or “the Son of God” is interesting and suggests this story comes from an early strand of the tradition.

At the same time, Mark also presents a Jesus who is hesitant to reveal his identity – Jesus wants to keep his identity secret. This is why often commands silence after performing exorcisms and healings.

The demons in contrast, are anxious to broadcast this knowledge. Here, Jesus commands the spirit possessing the man to be silent and then come out.

Interestingly, the unclean spirit's identification of Jesus by name and geographic origin, is typically how an exorcist tries to gain control over a demon in the ancient world. It was thought that knowing the demon's name gave the exorcist power over it.

Here, the roles are reversed. It is the demon who attempts to gain control over Jesus by identifying him. However, Jesus' response is to take control. The Greek phrase used here - **Φιμωτητι καὶ ἐξελθε ἐξ αὐτοῦ** which can be translated as “Be muzzled and come out of him!” . In extra-biblical texts, the verb **φιμαω** is associated with the idea of binding, muzzling, immobilizing or rendering someone unable to function.

In contrast to the verb **σιωπάω** which conveys simple silence.

The response of the unclean spirit is to come out of the man, but not without a violent struggle. The Greek verb used here **σπαράσσω** means ‘to throw into convulsions’.

The language used to describe the actions and words of the unclean spirit possessing this man in the Capernaum synagogue suggest that Jesus' authority was challenged in the encounter and that the unclean spirit left only after a violent and highly charged encounter with Jesus.

In the exorcism of the Gerasene Demoniac in Mark 5, the response of the man possessed by a demon to Jesus is similar: “What have you to do with me, Jesus, son of the most high God. I adjure you by God, do not torment me. For he had said to him, “Come out of the man, you unclean spirit”.

5) Opposition

Jesus himself was accused of being possessed by a demon in all strands of the tradition, including Mark, Q and John's gospel.

In Mark 3:20-22, also presumably placed in Capernaum, Jesus has presumably been casting out demons, although this is not stated explicitly. We can determine this from the response of the crowd.

“Then he went home; and the crowd came together again, so that they could not even eat. When his family heard it, they went out to restrain him, for people were saying, ‘He has gone out of his mind.’ And the scribes who came down from Jerusalem said, ‘He has Beelzebul, and by the ruler of the demons he casts out demons.’

In another version of this story found in Matthew 12 and Luke 11, Jesus turns this same accusation on its head and by both questioning the source of his accusers' exorcisms and by linking his exorcisms with the coming of God's kingdom:

In this account, Jesus has just cast out a demon from a man which had the effect of rendering him mute. Once the demon has gone out, the man is able to speak. While some are amazed, others accuse Jesus of casting out the demon by Beelzebul, the ruler of demons.

Jesus' responds in part: “If Satan is divided against himself, how will his kingdom stand? –for you say that I cast out the demons by Beelzebul. Now if I cast out the demons by Beelzebul, by whom do your exorcists cast them out? Therefore, they will be your judges. But if it is by the finger of God that I cast out the demons, then the kingdom of God has come to you.” (Luke 11:18-19)

This statement tells us several things:

- 1) That other Jewish exorcists were operating in Galilee were also casting out demons. Jesus intimates that these exorcists are drawing on God, just as he is and that they will thus stand in judgment over his accusers.
- 2) That Jesus linked his exorcisms to the coming of God's kingdom and in fact asserted that his exorcisms served as evidence that the kingdom had already come.

John's gospel also corroborates these accusations independently. In John 7:20 Jesus is accused of having a demon and in 8:48-52, some of his listeners accuse him of both being a Samaritan and having a demon!!!

Finally, in chapter 10 at the end of Jesus' discourse on the Good Shepherd, the Jews are divided in their response.

In verses 19-20, we read "Many of them were saying 'He has a demon and is out of his mind. Why listen to him?' Others were saying, 'These are not the words of one who has a demon. Can a demon open the eyes of the blind?'"

Concluding Comments on Passage – A few observations

Across cultures, possession by evil or demonic spirits is closely associated with agrarian cultures where the vast majority of the population lives at the subsistence level and a few elite own the land and the means of production, where a formal priesthood controls access to religious institutions and where power is concentrated in the hands of the elite.

In the gospel accounts, possession by unclean spirits both reflects this reality and comments on it in a way that is safe for the one who is possessed.

Jesus' exorcisms were not benign actions meant simply to restore the possessed person to health. Rather they were part of a response to issues of fundamental importance related most certainly to individual pain, but also to the experiences of a community living under oppressive rulers, and to a worldview that allowed for this possibility of possession by spirits.

The response of Jesus' opponents indicates resistance to his work and the idea that his exorcisms were deeply connected to God and to his kingdom. Rather than rejoice in the good that was happening, these folks chose to find a way to discredit Jesus - namely by linking his activities with the demon Beelzebul or with Satan.

Why? Jesus was not part of the established hierarchy for dealing with illnesses and afflictions. This role belonged to the priests. Accusing your opponent of being associated with evil was a sure way to discredit them and bring their activities to an end.

What we have in the cases of spirit possession and exorcism depicted in the gospels is an image of the battle between different spiritual camps and forces and over which camp Jesus and his deeds of power fall into.

John's gospel captures this essential debate well: Here is 10:19-20 again:

“Many of them were saying ‘He has a demon and is out of his mind. Why listen to him?’ Others were saying, ‘These are not the words of one who has a demon. Can a demon open the eyes of the blind?’”

For Mark, the demons knew who Jesus was, but many of those who witnessed these events were divided.

For the gospel writers, Jesus' exorcisms constitute evidence of God's kingdom breaking through.

We don't tend to think about or experience spirit possession and exorcism in mainstream western society. Rather, it tends to be associated with extreme trauma.

I was speaking with a Catholic priest recently who is working with refugees coming into Greece from Macedonia, and he noted that they are seeing a large incidence of demonic spirit possession among these populations.

Coming back to my earlier description, seeing spirit possession as an idiom of distress can help to explain this phenomenon.

What are our own traumas and how do we express these? What are our own idioms of distress?