

VOICES
Deuteronomy 18:15-20
Psalm 111
I Corinthians 8:1-13
Mark 1:21-28

The poet Mary Oliver has written a wonderful poem about whales and whale watching. She describes the delight in seeing humpbacks diving and breaching, playing and singing. In between writing of shouting for joy at the sight and describing them playing with seaweed, come these lines, “for some unbelievable/ part of a moment against the sky—like nothing you’ve ever imagined—like the myth of the fifth morning galloping / out of darkness, pouring/ heavenward, spinning: then/ they crash back under those black silks.” You might just breeze past that phrase “fifth day” until you remember the story of creation in Genesis. It was on the fifth day of creation that God said, “Let the waters bring forth swarms of living creatures...So God created the great sea monsters and every living creature that moves, of every kind, with which the waters swarm...”ⁱ And when you remember, suddenly the dimension of Oliver’s poem expands from the wonder of a day of whale watching, to the wonder of God’s creation and the delight that God built into it.

Often we read a Bible story and slide past its connections to other parts of scripture and, if we do, we may miss out on some larger picture, some additional understanding. So this morning before we consider this account of Jesus and the man with the evil spirit, like Mary Oliver, I want to consider Genesis for a moment. You may remember that in the Genesis, God creates the world and everything in it by speaking. On each of the six days of creation, it is the voice of God that commands light and dark; sun and moon and stars; dry land and waters; plants and animals; and finally the human creatures, the earthlings. In creating all this, and then, declaring the seventh day for holiness and rest, God was making order out of chaos. That was the first creation and the voice that was heard was God’s.

It didn’t take long, however, for other voices to speak. There is the voice of the crafty serpent that speaks and casts doubt on God’s motives, the voice that tempts the earthlings with the idea of being godlike. There are also the voices of the humans, making excuses for their disobedience, casting blame, expressing guilt and anxiety. These other voices try to drown out the voice of God and the earth creatures can no longer live at peace with God.

With that in mind, let us consider our story for today. This story of Jesus and the man with the unclean spirit comes early in Mark’s gospel. Thus far, Jesus has been baptized, tempted in the wilderness and gathered his first few disciples to witness his work. He has declared that his calling is to proclaim God’s good news and now in this, his first miracle, he is demonstrating what good news means. His ministry was intended to make the unseeable God seen, to reflect God’s gracious love and desire to live with us in peace. For Mark, when Jesus speaks, we hear God’s voice; and when Jesus acts, we see God’s action in the world. His teaching is indistinguishable from his mission, and from who he is.

For his first deed of power, Jesus could have chosen to give a blind person sight or to feed crowds or to change water into wine. But in Mark’s telling, Jesus chose to silence the voices of the unclean spirits. He chose to free the man of his demons as a way of proclaiming God’s new creation. As in the first creation, Jesus was giving order to the chaos of the man’s spiritual being. As in the first creation, Jesus speaks with the authority of God. This new creation is the restoration of the relationship between

God and humankind. With clear inner authority, he literally calls out what is separating the man from knowing God as loving and merciful and the truth of his belovedness.

When we read about a person with an unclean spirit, we are likely to translate “unclean spirit” into mental or emotional illness. We don’t know how the man presented, how other people knew that he was possessed by an afflicting spirit, but he must have created some kind of spectacle. What we do know is that the spirit had a voice, or rather, that the spirit used the man’s voice to confront Jesus. The disturbed man wasn’t the only one hearing voices; everyone could hear that voice, and the voice they heard didn’t want to let go of the man. It was afraid of Jesus.

It must have been horrible for the man. Most of us are unable to wrap our minds around what it might mean to be demon-possessed, what it would be like to not only hear but to speak with a voice not your own.

And yet, if we are honest, we can acknowledge that we all are possessed—by jealousies, addictions, pride, unhealthy life styles, excessive worries, unforgiving attitudes, anxiety, drive for perfection. I find those demonic voices may whisper in my ear saying how right I am and how wrong that other guy. It is the voice that says how much I really deserve to have that possession or that I have earned this day for myself, forgetting that all I have is a gift from God. It is the voice that says I will be loved if I only work hard enough, look busy enough, strive long enough. It is the seductive whisper that says I have done my part to mend the broken relationship, I’ve gone the extra mile, so just wait for the other guy to come around. It is those voices that seem to make such good sense but which lure me away from the path God has laid out before me.

But there are other voices that can distract and deafen us, the voices outside our heads. Every day we hear voices that call us to stigmatize, even dehumanize others, and in this current season, particularly, to do so with people on the other side of the political fence. There are the voices that contribute to the walls of racism and xenophobia, sexism and classism and all the other isms and phobias that divide us from one another. Public theologian, Diana Butler Bass writes that the demons of the world are cynicism and snark, hopelessness, and dread.ⁱⁱ Those voices that echo in our heads and sometimes slip out in our conversations, are in opposition to the spirit of Christ. They are urges that seek to possess us, to bind us, to keep us from recognizing that we and others are God’s beloved. They stand in the way of us living the lives that God intended for us.

Jesus chose to silence the voices that drown out God’s voice as a demonstration of God’s new creation. One of the most lovely images in Genesis’ story of the first creation, comes in the third chapter, when God is described as walking in the garden in the cool of the evening, apparently a common occurrence because Adam and Eve recognized the sound of God’s footsteps.ⁱⁱⁱ Imagine the peace of strolling with God at the end of day, reflecting on the day’s work, anticipating the rest that will come with the darkness. The peaceful intimacy that was, when there were no other voices but God’s.

The man with the unclean spirit was ritually unclean. He did not belong in the synagogue; he was considered spiritually impure. He was not acceptable in polite company, an outsider, an unwanted person, distanced from God and neighbor. Jesus’ willingness to attend to him and offer him the gift of cleansing, showed God’s willingness to bridge the gap that kept the man from being at peace with himself, his community and with God. On a sacred day, the Sabbath, in a sacred space, the synagogue, Jesus chose

to free the man of his demons that he might walk again with God. For him it was a new Eden and for those who observed, his healed life was an illustration of the new creation.

Perhaps you too hear voices that try to drown out that divine voice. Those voices can be very strong and their greatest fear is that we will embrace our deep belovedness, that we will find purpose for our lives beyond self-serving desires. The truth is that we are greatly loved and created to share love in concrete ways. Each of us individually and all of us collectively are like the man afflicted by the demonic voices. We are broken in ways both unique and universal. But we are also loved by God with a fierce and determined love, a love with the power and authority to forgive and heal and free us from our demons.

I wish that Mark had told us more about the man from whom Jesus drove the evil spirit. I would like to know how he lived the rest of his life. Did he tell everyone he met about what Jesus did? Did he welcome the sound of the Divine Voice replacing the demonic voices? Did his story and his transformed life, transform others? We don't know, but this we can affirm—Jesus, the authoritative one, also offers us new lives. He offers health and peace in our lives and in our communities and has the power to silence the voices and confront the death-dealing forces around and within us. As those called to follow him, we are called to join him in that confrontation, to speak and act with boldness and clarity, and, with God's help, to live out in our words and deeds the new creation Jesus initiated. Amid all those other voices—the ones that rattle around in our heads and the ones around us that deny God's powerful love—amid all those voices, there is but one that speaks the truth of our unique belovedness. Listen for that one voice.

ⁱ Genesis 1:20-21.

ⁱⁱ Diana Butler Bass, *The Cottage*, January 28, 2024,

<https://mail.google.com/mail/u/0/#inbox/FMfcgzGwJvjrWSNKNpVJvjZGWLFKdqbW>.

ⁱⁱⁱ Genesis 3:8.