



Roanoke, Virginia

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## *“Truth: God Is Here”*

*Mark 1:21-28*

*1 Corinthians 8:1-3*

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Today’s text comes from Acts 17 and it occurs in Athens.

Paul was brought here from Beroea, fleeing from place to place to escape violent opposition. Now in Athens, Paul has been debating in the synagogue and the marketplace.

The Athenians, being a curious bunch, took Paul to the Areopagus because they wanted to learn more about the strange teaching he was arguing, and to let their leading council hear as well. Listen to Paul’s argument and listen for God’s word...Acts 17:22-31

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

*<sup>21</sup> They went to Capernaum, and when the Sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught. <sup>22</sup> They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority and not as the scribes. <sup>23</sup> Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, <sup>24</sup> 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.” <sup>25</sup> But Jesus rebuked him, saying, “Be quiet and come out of him!” <sup>26</sup> And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him. <sup>27</sup> 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.”<sup>28</sup> At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.*

### **1 Corinthians 8:1-3**

*Now concerning food sacrificed to idols: we know that “all of us possess knowledge.” Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up.<sup>2</sup> Anyone who claims to know something does not yet have the necessary knowledge,<sup>3</sup> but anyone who loves God is known by him.*

What you do reveals who you are?

Walking to the synagogue one Sabbath day, I am sure everyone who gathered did not suspect anything out of the ordinary. Ready for the same old routine: prayer, scripture, teaching, and then back home in time for the game. As they sat in their normal pew, I mean seat, the routine began without a hitch. Prayer was lovely, but a bit long. Then it was time for scripture and teaching. A stranger stood up and began to teach. But this was something different. He spoke with authority. He spoke as if he was part of the Word. Everyone was amazed. His teaching unsettled them and excited them. They leaned in; they wanted more.

Just as he finished teaching, a loud cry came from across the room. A man stood and asked this teacher, “What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth?” Well, that is an odd question. But at least everyone there now knew the name of this new teacher. The man continued, “I know who you are, the Holy One of God.” But I thought he just said his name was Jesus. The teacher, well Jesus—because they know his name now—remained unmoved, unafraid, and rebuked him. The man fell to the floor, convulsed and cried out loud. Something happened. Everyone there began asking each other “What is this? A new teaching? A new authority that even the unclean spirits obey?”

This is Jesus’ first public ministry act in Mark’s gospel.

The scene’s powerful and conflated “newness” is a recognition of the boundary-breaking reality that Jesus represents in that holy place at that holy time and sets up the ongoing truth that God’s reign has broken in.

And Mark’s gospel invites us into that newness even now.

### **But, Ben, how does a first-century exorcism speak to us now?**

I’ll share a story.

I meet with a small group of colleagues once a month to explore scripture through a spiritual practice called *lectio divina*. *Lectio divina* is a slow reading of scripture that treats scripture not as a text to be studied, rather, as the Living Word that moves and touches and transforms. With each



reading there is an accompanied prompt followed by a time of silence to allow God’s “living word” to speak to you.

The Markan exorcism was our passage for Thursday. The first prompt is always, what word or phrase sticks out or speaks to you or what image comes to mind today—lectio is always about the now. One friend was caught by the words “convulsing” and “crying with a loud voice.” For the next reading, we focused on how that word, phrase, or image makes you feel. My friend responded with the feeling of being worried about the man, a visceral, bodily sensation to help or at least meet him where he is. But he continued to say that during the silence that followed the reading, his worry moved to assurance. It was his feeling of inadequacy to be of any help against ‘demons’ that caused him to worry; but it was Jesus who stood up against the ‘demon’, and because of that the assurance came. With a puzzled yet amazed look on his face he then told us a story: “We have a neighbor of the church that has come to us several times, and today she made another visit.” Not but 2 hours before we met, this neighbor came to my friend’s church because she was feeling something and didn’t know how to deal with it. The neighbor was visibly and vocally upset—you could say she was “convulsing” and “crying with a loud voice.” My friend knows this neighbor and has had several conversations with her before. He walked her to his office to talk, hoping to deescalate the situation and offer help. She was in pain. She was hurting. She was confused. She was—possessed. My friend continued, “It is so wild! This happened, and now we are here looking at this passage. Like, I don’t think I did anything to help much less exorcise the demon.”

As they were talking in his office he could see her begin to get upset again. He asked her to take some deep breaths with him, and then followed up with, “So, tell me what is going on?” The neighbor explained that she feels angry. The anger she feels just boils up to the point where she doesn’t know what to do, how to deal with it, or why it is there. She cannot control it... “I feel like there is a demon inside me.”

You might be sitting here thinking the same thoughts I had on Thursday hearing this story. And I can assure you, they are the same thoughts my friend had in the middle of their interaction: a demon? Really? There is no such thing.

Did Jesus believe in demons? If so, was he just as primitive in thought as we believe others to be when speaking about demon-possession in the world. Or do we accept the fact of demon-possession as being true in New Testament times and as being still true today?

Jesus may or may not have believed in demon-possession. That is not the point. But what is evident in reading the story today, is the fact that Jesus assumed the reality of the man to be true.



As William Barclay puts it: It was real to the man and had to be treated as such or he could have never been cured.<sup>1</sup>

The reality of one person doesn't have to be shared, or even believed for that matter, to make it someone's truth.

You see, sitting in my friend's office, the neighbor spoke her truth. A truth that I am sure was hard to put into words, let alone say out loud. Her truth didn't make sense to my friend, certainly doesn't make any sense to me...but the reality of one person doesn't have to be shared, or even believed, to make it someone's truth.

There are all kinds of truths that confront us daily that seem as hard to believe as demon-possession. So, what are we to do?

This is where we can turn to Paul as an example. The Corinthian community faced a persistent debate about whether meat sacrificed to idols was clean or unclean, and if Corinthian Christians in that community were permitted to eat such meat. The debate was so invasive that Paul spent 3 chapters parsing out his response. In short, Paul knows, as do other Christians in that community know, that because there is only one true God, all rituals of sacrifice to other gods and idols were meaningless. Thus, the meat offered as pagan sacrifice was no different. They have that knowledge. But, Paul says, knowledge "puffs up"—knowledge in the face of those with a "weak conscience" can be demeaning, belittling, even harmful. And makes one seem rather arrogant.

Paul's response is not at all about meat, or even about acquiring knowledge. It is about love. "Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up." It is about the concern you have for your siblings in Christ. It's not about information; it is about transformation. Paul says, "Food does not bring us closer to God; we are no worse off if we do not eat or any better if we do. But take care that this liberty of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak."

Well, weak conscience or not, for some of the Corinthian Christians eating sacrificial meat is something hard to spiritually digest. That is their truth.

Whether the Corinthian Christians who possess the knowledge believe it or not, doesn't make it any more or any less true. Paul is not asking those with a weak conscience to grow in knowledge. Paul asks those with knowledge to grow in love.

"But take care that this liberty of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak." The word translated "liberty" here is the same Greek word (*exousia*) that is translated in the exorcism narrative as authority. *Exousia* (liberty, authority) can also mean freedom or privilege.

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<sup>1</sup> William Barclay, *The Daily Study Bible Series: the Gospel of Mark*, 36.



Besides this shared word, these two passages do not seem to fit together, let alone connect to our context today. I mean, an exorcism and a debate about meat sacrificed to idols.

These passages illustrate the liberating power of love against the evils of the world that try to divide and oppress, and it calls us to speak a healing and powerful truth against such evil.

There are demons—whether they be personal, communal, global, or even cosmic—that draw us away from Jesus. Yet, God’s boundary-breaking power and love made know in Jesus Christ, we can stand up to the demons and be freed.

How might we speak with authority to these demons just as Jesus did to the demon in the synagogue. Well, for starters we can name them.<sup>2</sup> We can acknowledge the truth of their reality; thus, we recognize they exist. We name the demon of unbelief, and we continue to name others we encounter: racism, inequality, religious and ideological intolerance, nationalism, classism, sexism, homophobia, ageism, bigotry, violence at home and at school, bullying, poverty, greed, war, human trafficking, terrorism, globalization for exploitation, information manipulation, media-infused fear. This is certainly not an exhaustive list.

“But take care that this liberty of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak.” We should do well to name not only our demons, but also our privilege.

As a white, hetero-normative, male, I live a life of liberty. I hold a certain level of authority through my education and in my position. I have certain freedoms that I know everyone does not possess or experience. I am privileged. And many of you share similar liberties, authority, freedoms, and privileges, to varying degrees.

Privilege can blind us to the realities of others in a world where those in positions of power overlook the truth, or in all honesty dismiss the truth of those less fortunate.

We live in a world where the truth about the hardships of those around us seem so exaggerated that they can’t be reality: the difficulties of public transportation to and from work; the lack of access to food, not to mention quality food, that families encounter daily; the challenges of sustainable housing, because we can’t think of any housing as affordable in the current market as home values and rent costs exponentially rise above income levels; the wage discrepancies based on gender and race and age; the inability of many to have affordable and reliable healthcare. Again, this certainly is not an exhaustive list.

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<sup>2</sup> Naming in the antiquity was a power move. The speaking the name of the other claims power and authority over the other. So, when the demon-possessed man says, “*What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? ... I know who you are, the Holy One of God*” there is a move to stand above Jesus in authority and rank. If we name the ‘demon’ we face and the world faces, we make the move to claim authority and power over them.



But this is true whether we believe it or not. There are demons that continually possess us as an individual, as a community, as a nation, and as members of the human race.

We can name them in order to claim authority and power over them. But then we must act. We can follow Jesus' lead and stand up, speak against such demons, and muzzle the shriek of their disturbance. We can follow Paul's advice and place love at the heart of our decision-making to build up the community as a whole.

We can follow Jesus' lead and reveal to the world all that is in it and that God is a boundary breaker. Any boundary we try to put in place, we think is in place, even those boundaries we perceive to be impenetrable, God bursts through. And so, we can stand and say, "Be silent! God is here."

And God is right here, even in the midst of all that possess us personally: depression, addiction, disease. God is here. Your God is here. In your grief. In your sickness. In your attraction to other gods and idols. Your God is here.

Your God is here. In the picket lines for equal pay. In the walks and rallies for change. In the board rooms and hearings to discuss policies for more inclusion. In school classrooms and PTA meetings. In free healthcare facilities and barrio teams offering medical care to most impoverished in the community. Your God is here.

Beloved, even as you stand and utter those words, "God is here", you might echo the demon's question to Jesus—what have you to do with us?

And you might also join in with those in the Capernaum synagogue, asking the question "What is this?" "What is going on here?" "How can this be?" You voice the unbelief. You acknowledge the doubt. You name the despair and disappointment of life.

And still, you speak the truth, your truth. God is here!

And then you act.

Because the truth about love is made known in word and deed.

