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Deuteronomy 18: 15 – 20
1 Corinthians 8: 1 – 13Ps. 111
Mark 1: 21 – 28-----
“What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth?”

For the people gathered in the synagogue, it begins much like any other Sabbath. The women at prayer on one side of the small building; the men on the other. The synagogue is not just the center for worship and education in the small community, it is the center of social life as well. And when you live in a village the size of Capernaum, nestled on the shore of the Sea of Galilee, it isn't hard to know who the newcomers are, and so eyes surreptitiously check out the stranger who sits with Simon, Andrew and Zebedee's sons, James and John. Who is he, exactly, and from where does he come? How has he come to be with these young men of the village?

The stranger sits erect, and yet at ease, eyes closed, seemingly oblivious to all the people around him whom he doesn't know. He is quiet but attentive until that place in the service when appointed leaders stand up and move to the front. His eyes open as the men, in turn, read from the scrolls of Holy Scripture, and then teach on it, passing on what has been handed down to them. The leader of the synagogue, exhibiting proper hospitality, catches the stranger's eye and invites him forward. As he moves to the front of the synagogue, all eyes are upon him. Ahh! He must be a journeying rabbi, a teacher, or perhaps even a scribe. It is not completely unheard of for a visiting rabbi to pass through the village and take an opportunity to participate. The people wait with eagerness to hear this new voice explicate the familiar passages.

Immediately, as the newcomer speaks, his Galilean accent is noticeable and familiar. But what is not familiar is the tone with which he speaks. It is unusual and commanding. It is the voice of one who knows that they speak with authority. With the same kind of awe and wonder used to ask, "Who was that masked man?", the men and women whisper among themselves, "Who *is* this??" The sidelong glances they give one another bespeak both their wonderment and their discomfort at the boldness of the stranger among them. Unlike all the others priests and rabbis that these people have ever heard, this man doesn't stand on the shoulders of those who have gone before. He doesn't say things like "as Moses said..." or "as Rabbi So-and-so taught...". Instead, this man dares to speak out of his own authority, and furthermore, he dares to have new teachings. He speaks compellingly, knowledgeably, directly. It is both refreshing and disturbing at the same time, and the people are uncertain how to respond.

Suddenly, in the middle of their marveling mixed with consternation, Jehu, a man known by the villagers to have demons, walks through the open doors into the synagogue. It is the first time he has dared to enter since being possessed by these unclean, unholy spirits. His appearance is as startling as the teachings of the stranger, and people turn from one to the other and back again as if they are watching a tennis match.

“What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth????” Jehu calls out to the stranger up front. “Have you come to destroy US??? I know who you are, the Holy One of God!!” The volley is in the stranger's court. The stranger, whom the demons within the man have identified as Jesus of Nazareth, the Holy One of God, even as most everyone else is still clueless to his identity.

The young rabbi looks evenly and intently at Jehu, as if looking into the very demons themselves. There is a firmness, perhaps even a sternness, to the rabbi's voice, and still, that unwavering presence of authority. "Be silent and come out of him!" Jesus of Nazareth, the Holy One of God, commands.

As everyone, including the stranger, watches, Jehu suddenly folds in half with deep convulsions, crying out in unnerving shrieks, before he collapses limp and unconscious on the floor. There is a moment of absolute silence, as people absorb what they have just witnessed. A few people look up to the strange man at the front who is getting stranger every minute.

Jesus' face is gentler now, softened with compassion and concern, though his eyes are still fixed on the inert form of Jehu. Suddenly, as if nothing the least bit unusual has just happened, Jehu picks himself up off the floor, brushes the dust off of his robes, rises to his full height, and looks back up with a quiet smile at Jesus, who returns the quiet smile. There is visibly within Jehu now a peacefulness, a wholeness, a clarity of eye and mind that has not been there for a very long time. His carriage and demeanor are now indistinguishable from anyone else's as he quietly takes a seat among the men.

The moment of absolute silence is broken and the synagogue is filled with pandemonium. Except for Jehu, who sits reveling in his tranquility. And except for Jesus, who still stands up front, taking it all in. Everyone has started to speak at once, their voices filled with that odd mixture of fear and amazement. "Who is this man?? What is this, a new teaching? A teaching powerful enough to heal with just words??!" Without waiting for the service to finish, people rush out of the synagogue to begin spreading the word abroad. Everyone, that is, except Simon, Andrew, James and John, the newly healed Jehu, and Jesus. Jehu slowly rises, walks up to the rabbi, extends his arms and they exchange a deep hug. As he walks out of the building, Jehu takes one last glance back at his healer, this teacher, this man who has restored his life and rescued him from his terribly painful and solitary existence. Then, the two pairs of brothers and Jesus leave the synagogue as well, heading back to Simon and Andrew's home. Not one of the brothers, who have only just chosen to follow this man, have a word to say.

"What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth?" What indeed? This is not simply the question of the demons who had formerly resided with Jehu. It is also the question now of everyone who has witnessed these most unusual moments. It is the question of these young men who have only just united themselves with Jesus and begun a life-changing odyssey. And it is the question of us, who encounter Jesus two thousand years later. What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth?

Isn't it interesting in this story how the man with the unclean spirits is *in* the synagogue? Has the spirit been in him for a long time, or did it only inhabit him just before it acted out? Was the man already sitting quietly among the men, or did he burst in unannounced? Is he a visitor, a newcomer, to the synagogue or someone well known by all the villagers? Despite my embellishments of the story, we don't really know much about the man. We tend, though, to think that evil is somehow out there and good is in here. We also tend to think that about ourselves. Alexander Solzhenitzen, Russian novelist and staunchly Orthodox Christian, wrote, "*The line between good and evil does not go between countries or empires or religions or political systems. The line between good and evil goes right down the middle of every human heart.*" **

This exorcism is the first miracle recorded in the Gospel of Mark. Mark is the most succinct of the evangelists, and so he doesn't recount these miracles simply to generate awe and wonder. Throughout his Gospel, Mark will refer to Jesus' teaching and healing, but whereas he says very little

about the content of Jesus' teaching, he goes to great lengths to describe the miracles of healing and exorcism. Mark tells us of these encounters in order to give meaning to Jesus' presence, that is, to tell us just exactly what Jesus of Nazareth has to do with us.

In his book, *The Problem of Pain*, C. S. Lewis wrote, "As to God, we must remember that the soul is but a hollow which God fills. Its union with God is almost by definition, a continual self-abandonment – an opening, an unveiling, a surrender, of itself. A blessed spirit is a mould ever more and more patient of the bright metal poured into it, a body ever more completely uncovered to the meridian blaze of the spiritual sun." That is what Jesus does for this man in the synagogue who is seeking deliverance. Jesus clears the hollow of the man's soul by banishing the demons, the darkness, the evil, who have too longed claimed authority over this man's life. Jesus then offers the man the opportunity to be filled with God. How bodacious! How incredibly life-restoring.

We don't really know what happens with this man once he leaves the synagogue – what shape his new life takes, or what choices he makes. But he has a new beginning. He is a new creation filled with abundant life. 'What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth?' we ask, knowing all the while that Jesus comes on a mission of destruction, of clearing out the hollows of our souls, of unseating our demons, ready to fill us with God and ready to create in us new beginnings, and to make *us* a new creation. Jesus, the Holy One of God, comes to tear down walls that we build to separate ourselves from one another, from God and even from ourselves. Jesus comes to break the shackles which bind us to those demons of darkness and which inhibit us from the power of love. THAT, my brothers and sisters in Christ, is what Jesus of Nazareth has to do with us.

** The Rev. Dr. Delmer L. Chilton, Epiphany 4B, 2015, *Two Bubbas and a Bible*

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