

Below the Surface

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Damascus United Methodist Church

Deuteronomy 18:15-20; I Corinthians 8:1-13; Mark 1:21-28

Fourth Sunday After Epiphany – January 29, 2012

When I found out that I would be preaching today, I was excited. And then I read the lectionary scriptures and a sense of dread overcame me. It all seemed so depressing. Of the many classes I have to take in seminary, not a single one teaches me how to perform an exorcism, nor do we learn how to avoid being tricked into eating food sacrificed to idols, and we certainly aren't instructed on the best ways to avoid the voice of God. I toyed with a few different ideas. I thought about choosing my own, happier scriptures. Who would really know? And then I thought about this wonderful class I had recently – we learned about the power of reading scripture in community and then silently reflecting together. Don't worry. While I do think that God is found in the quiet moments of our lives, the idea of standing here for the next ten minutes without speaking is more terrifying to me than these scriptures are.

This led me to a third option and one of the best things I have learned in my studies – there is always more to the story, we just need to dig deeper, to see past the obvious facts, to see below the surface.

The Gospel lesson today comes to us from the book of Mark. He seems to tell us two things about Jesus in this particular story. The more memorable of the two is that Jesus was able to command an unclean spirit to leave a possessed man. The second is that Jesus taught with more authority than the scribes. Both of these facts are important in teaching us who Jesus is. But is that all there is to learn?

There was a man possessed by an unclean spirit in the synagogue. Let me repeat that. There was a man possessed by an unclean spirit *in the synagogue*. This man was not wandering the streets of Capernum. He was not banished from the city in the desert. He was in the sacred space of the synagogue. We could look at that and say that the spirit had no fear of the people in the synagogue, but the spirit addresses Jesus. The spirit knows exactly who Jesus is – the Holy One. He *knew* Jesus and he knew that Jesus had power over him but he was still there.

When I was a little girl, I knew better than to touch my father's turn table or albums. I knew better, but sometimes I really wanted to listen to an album or look at the pictures on the sleeves and Dad wasn't home. You see, my father had a system for caring for his albums. You had to take it out of the sleeve touching only the edges. Then you laid it on the turn table and squirted a small amount of the special vinyl cleaner on the album and carefully held a tiny brush on the surface of the album as it spun slowly. This was important to remove any dirt or fingerprints that may have ended up on them. I knew I wasn't supposed to touch any of this without my dad. I also knew that I never seemed to clean my fingerprints off the vinyl well and that Dad would know if I'd disobeyed him. I knew all of this, but the draw of Styx or Chicago or my own He-Man and She-Ra movie soundtrack would pull me to the stereo. But when Dad came home I was as far from his stereo as possible. He always knew it was me, but I tried to avoid getting caught for as long I could. The draw of the music was not enough to cancel out my fear of seeing my father's angry face.

Even as a child self-preservation won. I think most of us can agree that avoiding trouble is usually the choice we make. It's why we all suddenly slow down just before the speed camera. So how do we account for the possessed man in the story from Mark? Why was the unclean spirit in the same place as Jesus? He could have been anywhere else and avoided being banished. And why does Mark tell us about it? Jesus could have healed any number of people in the synagogue. This possessed man *walked* into the sacred space of the synagogue and *listened* to Jesus teach. The spirit could not resist the draw of the Holy One of God even if it meant his banishment.

Jesus drew another teacher to him – Paul, whose letter to the Corinthians we heard part of this morning. Paul gives us instructions that may not seem useful to us today. I think we can all agree not to eat anything that has been sacrificed to an idol. I cannot imagine that any of us would even be somewhere that a sacrifice of that sort was taking place. So should we just bypass this part of First Corinthians? Just move on to the good part where Paul talks about love?

No, there must be something more to this. We need to dig a little deeper. Paul tells us that food does not defile us, nor does it bring us closer to God. So we don't have to keep kosher – hooray for bacon, but that delicious piece of chocolate is not actually a religious experience either. But Paul wants us to pay attention to

more than just our food choices. He warns us against becoming a stumbling block for others. We cannot pay attention to just ourselves, we must think about those around us as well. A glass of wine with my dinner may not separate me from God. However, that same glass of wine drunk in front of someone struggling with sobriety may become a stumbling block for them. Now my decision has separated one of my brothers or sisters from God. The unclean spirit heard the call of Jesus and immediately responded, will my brother or sister who I have caused to stumble be able to hear that same call?

We listen for the call of Jesus, the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, the voice of God at Mount Horeb. We are taught to pay attention, to discern where God is leading us. We learn that this is a blessing in our lives. Our Israelite ancestors feared the voice of God so greatly that they asked to never have to hear it. They asked for an intermediary, a prophet that would tell them what God intended. Initially, this may seem a little silly to us, but let's look below the surface of that request. What were the Israelites experiencing? Who here has heard a voice that shook an entire mountain? Or watched a sea split in two and swallow an army? Or were followed around by a pillar of fire? Any one of those things might scare me into asking for a prophet instead.

So many of us are taught not to fear the Lord, Jesus is our friend and we have no reason to be scared. We do not heed the words of the psalmist – “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom”. We are also taught not to talk about the voice of God actually speaking to us. We can be inspired, called, led, but no one claims to actually have a conversation with God. They would immediately be branded as crazy, even in a seminary class. But where do we think the prophets come from?

I have no doubt that those called to be prophets are terrified. Terrified of the voice of God and terrified of the mission they are given. Doing the work of a prophet is a huge undertaking– standing up to society and telling the people in power that they are wrong. The Martin Luther Kings, Mother Therasas, Oskar Schindlers heard the voice of God and stood against what was wrong in this world. The men and women who lead house churches in Iran and China, the aid workers in Somalia – all of these people have responded to the voice of God. Just like the spirit Jesus commanded to leave the possessed man, these people have listened and obeyed knowing that it could mean their own banishment or their death. This is the voice that terrified the Israelites. And this is the voice that we ask our

leaders to listen to for us. We ask that they would please bring us the message of God. Do we stop to think about what that truly means? Do we acknowledge the potential fear and struggle they may endure to bring us the Word of God? We are very blessed in this country that our leaders are not persecuted for preaching and leading a church. Christians in other parts of this world face the possibility of imprisonment and death. We would all do well to remember that no matter where in the world we find ourselves, the call of God is a serious matter. It is irresistible, as the unclean spirit in the Gospel of Mark discovered. And as the people of God, we must remember to walk alongside our prophets, careful to not cause them to stumble, all of us supporting each other as we pray for the will of God.

We may not have to exorcise evil spirits, combat idols, or hear God's voice shake a mountain, but we can discover the continuing message of God in all of the scripture if we take a little time to look below the surface.