

JESUS, IN A BLOW-OUT
Sermon for Epiphany 4B:Mk 1:21-28
LPC, 2/1/15

You can bet that over the past two weeks the New England Patriots and the Seattle Seahawks have been studying films of the other team's games. It only makes sense to know your enemy. In fact, you might say that sometimes our enemies know us better than our friends.

That is certainly true in today's lesson from the Gospel of Mark. Jesus meets "a man with an unclean spirit" in the synagogue. It's not crystal clear from the text, but the one who cries 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," is not the man. It is the "unclean spirit" within him.

Consider that we are just twenty-some verses into Mark's spare, rapid-fire account of Jesus' life. Here's what has happened so far, according to Mark: John the baptizer has testified that Jesus is coming, and will be greater than himself, John. John has also declared that Jesus will "baptize with the Holy Spirit," whatever the heck that means. But John has stopped short of identifying Jesus as God's Son. After John baptizes Jesus, we are told that a heavenly voice declares that Jesus is God's Son. But so far no one other than God Godself has acknowledged this fact.

Isn't interesting that an unclean spirit recognized Jesus' holiness before any of his friends do?

Now I know we no longer talk about unclean spirits. Nowadays we would say that this man doesn't have an unclean spirit, he has psychosis. Whatever "demons" are causing him to act insane are within his psyche, not independent forces that have come from outside him to invade and torment him.

Thank goodness we have progressed enough to discount evil spirits! Belief in spirits like this makes it too easy for people to shrug off responsibility for their own irrational behavior, saying, "The devil made me do it," or other similar excuse. Through the miracle and, yes, blessing of modern psychology, people can now, often with professional help, treat the illnesses of the unconscious mind with conscious reasoning, patient therapy and, sometimes, pharmaceuticals. This is all to the good.

But Jesus' audience, and Mark's audience, did not think the way we do about such things. To fully understand Jesus' healing miracles, and figure out what they mean for us, we have to figure out what they meant for the people for whom these stories were put to paper.

Jews in Jesus' day believed, as we do, that God created a good world. The presence of evil in the world was a problem for them, as it is for us. Back then evil forces

The Very Rev. Cynthia Byers Walter

that could not be understood by human beings were personified and called demons or unclean spirits. Here is where we diverge from our forbears. We don't call them that any more. But are there not still evil forces in the world we don't understand?

Even St. Paul complained that he didn't seem able to do the things he wanted to do but instead did the very things he hated. Why is that? What causes otherwise good people to have contempt for those different from themselves? What makes people of different ethnicities who have lived peaceably side-by-side for centuries rise up from time to time and murder their neighbors – Germans of the Third Reich, Hutu and Tutsi in Rwanda, Boko Haram in Nigeria *today*? What makes you, a good Christian, think, say or do hurtful things?

Then there is the whole question of why innocent people get sick, or suffer terrible tragedies.

It's a mystery. For all we know about why these things happen, it might as well be unclean spirits.

The ancient world took for granted that there are all kinds of forces and powers afoot in the world, seen and unseen, some benign, some neutral, and some downright evil. The point of Mark's story is that Jesus trumps them all. Jesus rules over the natural and the supernatural.

God's appearance on earth as a human being in the form of Jesus of Nazareth represents the beginning of an end-game with the forces of evil where the outcome is certain. Jesus will win in a blow-out.

This particular healing story, occurring near the very beginning of Mark's gospel, shows that Satan's empire is breaking up. The unclean spirits in the service of evil are losing their grip on creation.

What does that mean for us? Obviously the battle is not completely over. There are still, evidently, forces of evil afoot in the world today. Well, there are several implications.

First, take heart. Everything will, eventually be all right.

Second, be patient, and understand that there is more in heaven and earth than can be dreamt in our philosophy. There are forces we don't understand, but we can rely on God to see things through to the end.

Finally, follow Jesus. If you don't do this because he loves you and wants the best for you, do it to be on the winning side. Because Jesus will win, in the long run, in a blow-out.