

Mark 1:21-28  
Epiphany 4 B  
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For what do we dare hope? This is a negotiation you and I are thick into during our entire lives.

As children life teaches us quickly that we ought hope for less than we think is owed us. To be a child is an exercise in our wills being thwarted on many fronts. We want this or that from this or that parent or adult. But life, as it soon turns out, is set up to grant us only some of what we want. “No,” is that unpleasant word that is often the truth.

So you and I learn to adjust. Hope is negotiated downward to reality. Compromises are made. Adulthood brings its distinctions between what is hoped for and what is possible. Setbacks are just a part of the territory. And there is that lurking sense that just over the horizon are truths to which we shall ultimately have to adjust. They are not what we hope for. They are what grind toward us no matter what we might hope.

My mother was the master of this negotiation. She seemed always to be able to name the compromises that were called on in many life situations. She had a way to inject a helpful dose of realism into any unreasonable hope. My mother could always name what could go wrong, how one had not previously accounted for it. She could name the potential catastrophe in every benign situation. I am grateful to her for learning how to hope for appropriate things in life.

This is the progress of growing up, I suppose. Mark does not begin with any such wisdom. In beginning Mark’s ‘gospel’ of Jesus Christ no hope is negotiated downward toward something that we might deem more possible. Mark’s strategy is completely opposite. The career of Jesus begins immediately with the taking on of deep chaos, of dark threat; all that would make us quake with fear. For this story is not of someone who was sick with some syndrome and who got better. This is exorcism.<sup>1</sup>

We could debate here the differences between biblical times and how our time had now rendered problematic the issue of “exorcism.” One side might take the position that in a post-Enlightenment age, the only facts worth considering are those that science uncovers. For that reason we would have to make of exorcism a kind of metaphor about those things in life that overwhelm us and render us out of control. Or, another side might return

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<sup>1</sup> “The Jesus of Mark is first of all an exorcist and a healer.” Donald H. Juel, *The Master of Surprise: Mark Interpreted* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994), p. 68.

with the belief that they had witnessed a possessed person – perhaps when their kids were teenagers – and exorcism is the only way to understand how they could get better.

But even as that debate continued we would risk losing the brilliant good news. In all events this man is seriously deranged and helpless to ask even for help. Let's just take this at face value. However we might understand possession as something far more serious than just an annoying illness. This is a confrontation with all that “threatens to undo us.”

This Jesus presumes from the very beginning of his work to have authority over the darkest chaos of our lives. And the darkness knows it. This is to be a stark confrontation between God and turgid madness.

“What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? . . . I know who you are!” screams the evil spirit. There is a kind of panic expressed by the spirit at the potential disruption of the established order.<sup>2</sup> The spirits' defiance leads immediately to the spirits' fear.

“Shut up and come out of him!” And the madness convulsed the man, twisting and cramping, distorting and wrenching. And with that the hushed decorum of polite scripture study in the synagogue is shattered into a million little bits. But as dramatic as this exorcism strikes us it is but a thirty second trailer to the movie of this life. Notice is here served that God intends to work an exorcism of the whole world.

This is warfare.<sup>3</sup> Do not be irritated at the military metaphor. If Mark had been a musician or a clown he would have used another. This arrival of Jesus God has declared war on all the darkness and chaos that you and I grapple with in creation. And now the battle is joined. But he was not. God has determined in the life, death, and resurrection of this Jesus to put the world to rights. And here at the very beginning of this good news announced by Mark, this exorcism is the fair warning about what is coming.

This is a contest, and we are more than equal to it. Why? Because of God's word, the gospel, the good news of Christ. This is ludicrous, of course. Hardly anyone believes it.

And what if it's true? If this opening of public ministry in Mark is true then everything depends on keeping this word as sharp and polished as possible. And we can do no worse than letting this word have its say. Stand by and let God do his work. Let nothing smother that word. And anyone who tumbles to such a word as this has God as a shield.

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<sup>2</sup> Ched Myers, *Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark's Story of Jesus* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Press, 2003), p. 142.

<sup>3</sup> Much of the language and ideas of the balance of this sermon is from the Roy A. Harrisville sermon, “The Weapons of Our Warfare,” March 6, 2010 accessed on January 26, 2012 from <http://gnesiolutheran.com/podcast/?p=archive&cat=all>. (What can I say? I read and heard a lot of good Harrisville this week.)

This word is no instrument. It is no tool for self-aggrandizing strategies. Nor is it simply spiritual elixir to make someone feel better. If it in this flesh only that we dare to hope, we had best not hope for much<sup>4</sup>. For, as one writer put it, this “‘flesh’ is too weak to be borne aloft!”<sup>5</sup>.

This word is something rather that belongs to God, is from God, and is one with God. This word is God’s great leap into the cosmos. This word is God’s determined resolve to put the world to rights and win it all back. And it will accomplish that which is impossible for this flesh to accomplish. This exorcism declares God’s intention no more to acknowledge or honor any boundaries. Not even the gates of hell will keep God out.

What God’s grace gives us does not derive from what we have, as if it were already contained in that, were only a change of name for an old condition. A creation of God is beginning in us . . . to embrace our whole nature and transfigure our relationship with each other . . . For this reason, the apostle can let the whole world sink to the bottom with Jesus’ cross. Something new and glorious is arising in its place: the new creation of God.<sup>6</sup>

If you must have a takeaway from this opening exorcism, let it be this. Let God do this work. Let Jesus do this mad work n this poor writhing and convulsing soul before him on the synagogue floor. And let Christ do this work on whatever other poor soul, twisting and cramping, distorting and wrenching may find on his cross. Let this word do its work. And then all that we might dare to hope for will pale before that which God actually gives. Amen.

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<sup>4</sup> I Corinthians 15:9.

<sup>5</sup> Roy A Harrisville, *The Miracle of Mark* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing, 1967), p 50.

<sup>6</sup> Adolf Schlatter, *Die Briefe an de Galater, Epheser, Kolosser, und Philemon: Erläuterungen zum Neuen Testament* cited and trans. by Roy A. Harrisville, *Fracture: The Cross as Irreconcilable in the Language and Thought of the Biblical Writers* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 2006), p. 54.