

**All Saints Episcopal Church, Steenrijk**

**12 Leidenstraat**

**Willemstad,**

**Curacao**

**The Fourth Sunday**

**after the Epiphany (B)**

**January 28, 2024**

**A Sermon by the Rev. Joe Parrish**

**“Finding the Good within Us”**

**DRAFT**

**The Holy Gospel according to**

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

Jesus and his disciples went to Capernaum; and when the sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught. They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes. Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, 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.” But Jesus rebuked him, saying, “Be silent, and come out of him!” And

the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him. 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.” At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.

Dear Lord, help us to follow Christ more closely, love him more dearly, and help produce other believers in Christ more surely, day by day. Amen.

Early in my ordained career and even before I helped lead a weekday Bible study at an Episcopal church in New York that was open to the public. But to know that class was happening one generally had to be in church on the previous Sunday. I had a middle-aged man frequently present in among about ten or fifteen other generally younger people, a person who seemed to be trying to impress someone else in the class; and when I made a comment that Jesus was the Son of God, he commented firmly

back that ‘we are all sons of God.’ I sensed by his accent that he was from a middle eastern country, not recognizing then that he was likely a Muslim, thinking back on it, and he really did not see Jesus as anyone particularly special. We debated the issue a bit, I reaffirmed that we Christians do reserve the title “Son of God” for Jesus Christ, and I went on to other topics. He did not seem obviously to impress many if any others with his contrary comments, and he no longer attended the next classes. I didn’t see any convulsions or demons coming

out, as we witness in today's gospel lesson, and my rebuke, if one could even call it that, was very understated and low key, yet I was definite that Christians do believe that Jesus is "The" Son of God, divine, not made, but still fully human. That's what we will declare in our Creed following this homily. But of course, taking the whole world into consideration, we Christians are a pretty small minority in believing and confessing that Jesus is "The" Son of God. So, in a way, the world is more inhabited by what our Gospel writer of

Mark might consider demon-possessed people than otherwise, to come right down to it. We are not that surprised when someone we know really does not believe as we do, since as I noted, to be realistic, we Christians are quite outnumbered.

Recently a father commented to me that his daughter no longer believed in God after her mother, his wife, died rather suddenly. She was possibly angry at God and no longer went to any worship service, and she declared she was now an agnostic or an atheist. That

attitude was very disturbing to her father; my only comfort to him was that in time she might 'get over her anger' and return to the church. But many parents and grandparents and God parents often confide their distress about a child or grandchild or God child who seems to be 'anti-religion' when they grow into adulthood. (That observation is not that rare, sorry to say.) Many have found reasons that their childhood faith no longer seemed to help them in times of difficulty, and they have for the time being jettisoned their whole Christian



belief system, but fortunately mostly retaining the ethical aspects of Christianity. Do you think that would be comparable to being ‘demon possessed’? In a way it is. Satan is always on the lookout for a vulnerable person to turn them away from Christ and God--seems to me to be a very common experience nowadays. Our children often stray far from their upbringing in the church.

People who have studied this phenomenon have found that statistically about 75 percent of children who were brought up on a home where both their

mother and their father attended church will return to church at some point. If only their mother attended Sunday church with them, the probability of them coming back to church as adults is only about twenty-five percent. But if they came to church with their father, their probability is nearly twice that or about forty-five percent of them eventually become church goers in their adult years. There is at least an additive effect when both parents of a child attend church regularly, and there is likely some positive synergism when both attend.

My own parents always attended church on Sundays, except when we were on vacation, but their example surely has made a very positive impact on me.

Rev. Mary Moore Roberson, a priest in a large church in South Carolina, tells the story of one of her parishioners, a single mother named Barbara:

“Barbara took to appearing, first at the door to [the pastoral care clergy’s] office and then mine. She was a member of that very large, very affluent place. [But] she was neither affluent nor large - - short enough to be easily overlooked.

She told us that the bank was about to take her childhood home, the house in which she and her 10-year-old son, Jeffrey, lived. The treasurer gave her advice and offered to speak to the mortgage people, who went on and foreclosed anyway. And for a time, we heard, she and the boy lived in her tired old blue Chevrolet, eventually moving into the grand sounding Jesse Jackson Townhomes, a public housing project filled with the crack of guns and cocaine, so dangerous that Barbara could not allow her child to go outside to play.

The place might as well have had a sign over its entrance: Abandon hope all ye who enter here. Or perhaps: ‘Having abandoned hope, enter here’. But she did not-abandon hope, that is. Over and over during those long months, I would look up from my desk to find Barbara in the doorway, her short, round body fixed there, often with her taller pasty-faced child looming over her right shoulder.

- “Jeffrey needs shoes for school, and I don't have the money to buy them. Will you help?”

- “I don't have the money for car insurance.”

- “I don't have the money for gas.”

- “Jeffrey's not going to have any Christmas unless you help.”

“We gave her just exactly what she asked for, layer after layer of Band-Aids as our own selves became overwhelmed by her persistent need and our impotence

in the face of that. We just plain came to dread the sound of our normally cheerful receptionist as she announced tiredly, “Barbara's here.” Once again on the threshold, until one day a member of the staff came to the pastoral care priest and me and said, “Let's stop messing around and really help her. It's going to take a lot of money, and you know as well as I do who is going to say we're crazy. But we can live through that.” He brought us up short. He brought us on into the room where the healing touch of our Lord awaited, reminding us by implication of

the pledge that we make when we first stand in the doorway, the baptismal [covenant] vows that we renew from time to time:

- “Will you proclaim by word and example the good news of God in Christ?”

- “Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself?”



- “Will you strive for justice and peace among all people and respect the dignity of every human being?”

to which we each answered, “I will with God's help.”

Rev. Roberson continued: “Those words came back to us, but, now, up close and personal. Barbara enrolled in nursing school, living in a furnished apartment donated for the time it took her to complete her education, driving a car provided by another parishioner, her

tuition and day-to-day expenses taken care of.

“I don't have the faintest idea where Barbara and her son, Jeffrey, are these days. I do, however, remember how she said she would tell the story called ‘God Helps,’ the chapters and chapters of mercy that came by way of her conviction that God would see her desperate need, would care about her, would cause her life to be re-ordered, and in fact, had brought her through the

door into the place where God had chosen for that to be done.

“A straight-A student and only a step away from receiving her [graduation] cap, Barbara announced, ‘I want to come speak to the vestry at its next meeting.’ She did come and stood there before the church's leaders--the rector and the 12 rich business people and the civic movers and shakers. She stood erect in her white uniform, a stethoscope around her neck and told her story of the eking away of her life and of the miracle of her

new life, and most especially of its purpose. These are the words that every person in that room believed then as we wept together, and remembers now-- most especially what she said last:

‘Thank you for helping me when I could not help myself. Because of you, I am going to be able to help others. I want you to know this. Every single time I touch a person for healing, this parish will touch that person with me. You will be right there.’ That is ongoing openhandedness.”

The disparate voice we may hear may not be the voice of a ‘crazy’. It may be the voice of God calling out to us for help.

It is up to us as believers to discern the noise from the songs of angels. Let us not aver in our efforts to listen carefully and prayerfully, and by the power of the Holy Spirit discern how we may be best able to know the clean from the unclean, right from wrong.

Amen.

January 28, 2024

“Finding the Good within Us”

Mark 1:21-28

Description:

Discerning the voices plays a key role in today's society. Christians are challenged to look beyond the surface, to find the presence and love of Christ in another person, and to respond with Christ's love in all situations.

Tags:

Church, Bible, study, synagogue, voice,  
demon, Jesus, Nazareth, Christ, God,  
angry, exorcism, Son of God, middle  
eastern, Muslim, Christian, Holy Spirit,  
discern, nurse, stethoscope, vestry, rich,  
poor, single, mother, son, donation,  
crazies, baptismal, covenant

**St. John's Episcopal Church**  
**61 Broad Street**  
**Elizabeth, New Jersey 07201**  
**The Fourth Sunday after Epiphany (B)**  
**February 1, 2009**  
**A Sermon by the Rev. Joe Parrish**  
**The Holy Gospel according to**  
**Mark 1:21-28**

Amazing God, we worship and adore  
you. Amen.



When were you last amazed? Was it at a magic show? Or maybe at a music concert, or a fireworks display on July the 4th, or at an election, or maybe at a county fair, or at the circus? The Amazing Wallenda walks a high wire across the highest point of the tent! I was amazed to read how the dance of a honey bee tells other bees where there is good pollen near the hive.

But how about being amazed at church? Aren't these amazing new chairs? They were donated to us by the efforts of an alert Episcopalian who worked at a large company not far away who found they were

going to be replaced and who told his rector about them; and then his rector put the information on our Diocesan email listserve that I read from time to time. Amazing, no?! And here they are today for us to sit in and enjoy!

Amazing! And very comfortable and elegant and beautiful! We thank those amazing folks who put a good word in for us to get these nice donations.

It's not that easy to amaze folks at church. Jesus amazed the synagogue worshipers in his hometown. It wasn't new chairs that amazed them; it was the fact Jesus could drive out an "unclean spirit"

from a man who was there in the synagogue. The man recognized Jesus, the young upstart carpenter in town, the demon possessed man knew Jesus to be the Holy One of God, God's Messiah, the One all the prophets had foretold. And suddenly here the Holy One of God was teaching in his hometown synagogue.

I preached at my hometown church at its 79<sup>th</sup> Anniversary celebration with about a thousand people in attendance. My childhood friend there was amazed that I didn't get stage fright! Too bad my spectacular sermon didn't amaze him! But

then I don't think I cast out any unclean spirits that day either!

Jesus had quite an effect on the world of demons. They frequently could identify him, and did so, usually to try to frighten him away or cause him consternation or embarrassment. But Jesus took his cue from his Heavenly Father, and countered those unclean spirits with a word of command: "Be silent and come out of him!" Jesus said. And with those simple words, a man was healed of a demon possession that possibly had troubled him for years.

I recall encountering a young woman in front of the Citicorp Building on Park

Avenue in midtown Manhattan years ago. She would stand there and scream or talk loudly about whatever came to her mind. She saw me one day wearing the class ring of my father and wanted me to give it to her. I guess she just liked shiny objects. But she tormented the employees and patrons of that giant bank unmercifully with her brash and loud behavior. And no one could cast out her demon. It went on for weeks. I was amazed she could get away with such behavior. But I guess the bank executives felt sorry enough for her to allow her to use their big sidewalk as a public arena for her mental illness. It was only a few years after

the inmates in many mental hospitals were discharged everywhere in America. Now they are voluntarily housed in various mental facilities and can come and go as they please, pretty much.

I know one person I do help every time I see her. She is a long-time schizophrenic, escaped from Iran after the Shah of Iran was deposed. For a year or so my wife and I took care of her, but the church we were attending finally insisted we stop helping her; she never was a church goer; I think she may be a Muslim. (Later I found out she was from one of the persecuted Christian families of Iran after the Shah lost power.)

And we lost track of her for a while. She is very quiet, never shouting, almost always very courteous. From time to time I helped her get housing, and once I found her admitted to a hospital where there was a doctor, a psychiatrist, who spoke Farsi, her native language. He learned a bit of her story: she was educated in England on the Isle of Mann at an exclusive girls school: I even wrote that English school about her, thinking they might help, and they did identify her, but said they couldn't give her any help and couldn't trace her parents. Her parents were very wealthy and sent her there to that private school as a young woman to

learn English better. But when the political regime changed in Iran, apparently they lost all their fortune, and their daughter somehow found her way to the streets of Manhattan, perhaps devastated by her loss of her parents and wealth and all her friends, and she likely lapsed into severe depressive mental illness and became homeless. She can take care of herself quite well; she is a survivor, intelligent enough to know how to cope with the streets. But alas I have never been able really to ‘cast out her demon.’ She never came to church—she rarely would come to church. (Later she attended our Bible class for a few years, and was able to



speak coherently and thoughtfully.) The psychiatrist at that hospital said long term schizophrenics are not usually able to be rehabilitated. But she did seem to get a bit better, just knowing some people care about her. I don't think the Immigration people want to pick up homeless schizophrenics off the streets, only construction workers and others who are doing jobs that apparently they think native born Americans or naturalized citizens should do instead. I don't think I have ever encountered a homeless alien in the Elizabeth Detention Center. The immigration authorities are perhaps a bit too 'picky', as my friend surely

has no identification papers whatsoever.

Everyone on the street eventually loses all identification, which is both a blessing and a curse.

But then there's Tilly. She was at church every day the doors were opened. We did help her get a job at the church where I worked. She talks to things on the ceiling. I can't see them, but she certainly does. And you just have to let her talk to those things up there, debate with them; even though they are invisible to us. She showed up at my church with her leg bleeding—some teenagers had thrown a bottle at her and it broke when it hit her leg as she sat on a park

bench in Central Park. She had lost her job at a big legal firm during the 1982 recession. Fortunately, we quickly got her leg treated, and rehabilitated her enough to get her inside, in a room. It was a challenge to do that, believe it or not. I would pay her for work, then she would give all the money away to somebody at church, and go back to the streets. But over a period of years she got more accustomed to living indoors rather than in Central Park or at a local all-night deli. I found out she was an amazing typist—well over a hundred words a minute, and so precise, you wouldn't believe it. She could copy dozens of lines of financial

information faster than we could program it into a computer, with an accuracy that would cause your hair on the back of your head to rise. But you had to let her talk to the ceiling, loudly, from time to time. And she always attended church. Finally, other people in that church got to know her and love her; she would always remember your birthday, your anniversary, whatever. And she was generous to a "T". The difficulty was in getting her to take care of herself before she gave away every cent she had. I was amazed we were able to help Tilly, and I think she earned enough to retire recently, but she probably still works there at that

church as she loves to be around people who will just ignore her conversations with the things on the ceiling. It's amazing what God did in her life. Unlike my other acquaintance, Tilly found God, right there at church. Or, maybe we found God through Tilly?

Every Sunday, we have a lot of Tilly's and Theodore's coming here to St. John's. They are homeless. Many apparently have 'mental problems' you learn once you get to talk to them. They mostly have gotten some sort of minimal government aid, welfare, disability, enough to either have a room, or at least have a room during the cold months.

Some are not that well educated. Grammar school, elementary school, is typically the upper range of achievement. Nowadays they would have been diagnosed as being autistic perhaps. Some just couldn't learn how to read.

I will have to admit I did meet one person at the Elizabeth Detention Center who could not read; he was from Brazil. I thought, "Great! I have a Portuguese Bible for him, only to learn after some difficulty that he could not read one word of Portuguese. But he could play the piano, and he knew an amazing number of Bible verses from memory. It was a bit of a challenge to

converse with him, as the other person there that evening spoke only Creole. But by the grace of God, we all could sing the same songs, using different languages, and we made friends there. He was finally able to get back to Brazil to his family—he was about 23 years old. But he was ‘rescued’ by knowing Bible verses by heart. Amazingly Jesus came to him as he had for the man at that synagogue twenty centuries before.

How about you? Do you need something cast out? Is there a problem that goes round and round in your head with no end? Maybe there is a persistent worry. It’s possibly one of those ‘unclean spirits’. I don’t know

where they really come from—possibly in a moment of panic or fear or something else, it just got into your head. It's not that uncommon, actually. But God can heal you, through the power of the Spirit of Christ.

In a way, I think Christ has healed all of us from some 'unclean spirit' in our lives. That unclean spirit separated us from the love of Christ, and maybe also separated us from the 'body of Christ' for a time. But by the power of the Holy Spirit we were cleansed and left in our 'right mind'. Jesus did that, and Jesus continues to do that.

I believe our Alpha class each Sunday helps some folks encounter the living Christ



right here at St. John's. And maybe the prayers or a word of encouragement, or just knowing they have a friend at St. John's 'does the trick', but it's really not magic. It's a Holy Spirit thing. Jesus is alive and well here at St. John's.

Lloyd and I and occasionally Elizabeth are here each Tuesday and Thursday from 10 to 2 to talk and pray with you if you just want to drop by. Come see us this week: Tuesday and Thursday from 10 to 2. We want you to find healing and wholeness and a bit of prayer. We are only the conduits of the miracle of the Holy Spirit. It isn't we who are doing anything, of course, but we

know the God who loves us and you over is always on the lookout for God's chosen ones. God has not left us alone. God sent his Son one day to that Capernaum synagogue for that one person with the problem who probably thought he would never be free again. But he was wrong, as God set God's world of healing and forgiveness in motion at the beginning of time. His Son was always coming to be with us as one of us. God the Father was too high and lifted up for us to approach God directly. So God's son took on human flesh and became one of us. And he showed us

the way to the Father, his Father and our Father.

Today, let us hearken to God's voice. Remember his Son died for you and for me. God has not forgotten you, and all your heartfelt prayers are going directly to God's ears by way of the Holy Spirit. Your prayers are sweet smelling incense to God. Each of your tears are counted in God's bottle of concern. Your hopes are always kept secure in God's heart.

Let God heal you. Let God save you. Let God help you find peace today, this week. Come, let us adore the Savior of the world, our Lord, our benefactor, our rock,

our Redeemer, who has saved each of us by his sacrifice on the cross for all our sins.

Amen.