

Today's gospel presents us with the challenging event of an exorcism. While in the synagogue in Capernaum Jesus encounters a man possessed with an unclean spirit. Mark once again ushers us into an event with actions that bring a lasting impact. In Capernaum, in a synagogue, a man with an unclean spirit addresses Jesus saying, "I know who you are, the Holy One of God." The event is the first public act of Jesus in Mark's gospel.

While I was working toward obtaining a Master's degree at Oral Roberts University, my Old Testament Professor Dr. Howard Ervin told the class a story about an event that occurred on his first trip to Israel. While getting off of the tour bus Dr. Ervin noticed a loud disturbance nearby. The noise was that of bleating sheep and the level of the noise was intense. He found it so disturbing until he asked the bus driver about the commotion. The driver realized what was occurring. The man with the sheep was not leading them. The man was not the shepherd of the flock but the butcher. The bus driver expressed the following: The shepherd leads the sheep and the butcher drives the sheep.

I had not thought about that story for a long time but I remember it because it has so much meaning. As a very zealous and enthusiastic seminary student, I yearned to serve the Lord and serve well. I found in those days that desire tended to get confused with calling. I needed to develop discernment -- to recognize that, every perception of a need is not a call to fill it.

Now, back to our lesson -- Jesus is in a synagogue in Capernaum -- a place of prayer -- a place where God is the topic of discussion. Yet also in the synagogue is a man possessed by an "unclean" spirit. Let's consider a few things that are occurring in this passage.

1. Being "unclean" in this community would have meant living in isolation -- distant from the community. Many are experiencing in our social isolation a sense of panic and aloneness. I believe this morning people are looking through their Zoom screens with hearts that know more about what it means to be isolated than ever before.
2. I believe through our journey in this season a greater understanding of the need to cry out -- even publicly -- is emerging. Many of the broken, life altering realities in our lives can seem overwhelming when lived in isolation. Beloved, one of the reasons why I am so thankful to be among you in this season of my journey. It is by God's

grace that I, like you, am the recipient of the fruits of the gifts that God has sent St. Mark's.

David brings a servant's heart and keeps on loving us. Buck reminds us to keep a balanced perspective by hearing the news and proclaiming, "What the hell!" Sarah brings an abundance of gifts and an offering of Zoom as well as joy! And Malinda -- my sister by another mother -- keeps partnering with others of you to make, for example, a Christmas pageant possible even in a time of social distancing. So, if you feel harassed and bothered and driven in this season -- welcome to this sacred space and receive the reminders that God cares and so do we.

There is an aspect of this exorcism that can be very insightful for our current journey. While I listened to a sermon on this text by the Rev. Amy Beveridge, a Lutheran pastor, I was challenged by her message. She focused on silence and even used the word as the title of her sermon. I suddenly began to realize that the balance of this sermon needed to address that same topic -- silence. So, echoing her sentiments let us shift gears for just a moment. Let us walk into the richness of the response of Jesus to this man's cry.

You see, there is no doubt that this possessed man's presence was disruptive and when he "cries out" Jesus rebukes him because it is actually the unclean spirit that is crying out. Jesus said, "Be silent, and come out of him." We are unaccustomed to silence and it can feel adversarial. But there is one thing that we must consider: Silence can be the door that leads to healing.

My father died in January of 2000. I was serving as an Assistant Pastor at a Baptist church in Dumfries. His death was disorienting to say the least. Well, by March of that year I had either officiated or attended at least 13 funerals. I was one of two full time staff for a congregation of 2,000.

Well, on the brink of a breakdown, I realized that something needed to change. I went away for a retreat at a monastery in Catonsville, MD near BWI. Spending time in silence with Episcopal nuns who believed that "Silence is God's first language" was just what I needed.

In silence, in that place that bordered by Patapsco Valley State Park I watched deer and other animals run and play. I sat in enclosed spaces and prayed watching the sun rise and set. God began the healing that I

needed as my tears of sorrow were replaced with joy -- my heaviness, as Isaiah wrote -- was exchanged for a garment of praise. No, this did not occur overnight but this retreat -- this time in silence-- opened the door so that healing could begin. This rarely silenced brain of mine learned that I could hear God best in silence. I also began to realize that healing is a journey and not a destination.

For me it took being isolated in order for me to learn to be silent. It took isolation to remind me that God is not the One who drives us but God is the One who draws us.

Jesus heard much more than mere words. Jesus heard a heart crying out from this isolation and confusion and despair. Jesus set him free because that Who Jesus is -- liberator and mind fixer and heart regulator as those in the church of my childhood used to say.

So, St. Mark's, who is showing up in the Zoom room when the topic of God is being discussed? Are we offering an authentic view of a loving God through scripture, songs, prayers? Can the broken be reminded of the nearness of God in and throughout our time of worship -- even in a Zoom box?

I encourage you to consider that our gathering and worship can actually be an avenue through which the broken find hope, the confused remember **whose** they are and those who are in despair may find direction.

So beloved I ask you today -- how is your heart? How are you doing? If you were to encounter Jesus today -- what would be the cry of your heart? What would be your prayer? Are you being driven or drawn?

Remember, it is the shepherd who leads the sheep. Follow this Shepherd on your journey and I promise you -- goodness and mercy shall follow you.