

# Stretching Toward Sunday

Thoughts, readings and reflections  
based on this week's lectionary readings

January 28, 2018

Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany, Year B

The readings this week:

- Deuteronomy 18:15-20 ◦ Psalm 111
- 1 Corinthians 8:1-13 ◦ Mark 1:21-28



[Click here to read this week's Scriptures](#)

## As One Possessed: Recognizing Jesus

Very often when we listen to a story like the one before us now, we find ourselves wondering who we would have been within it had we been there. At least that's what I find myself doing today as I imagine the events relayed in Mark's Gospel:

- Would I be among the crowd --- those so astounded by what they have heard and seen --- that I could not help but join in as they spread the news?
- Would I be among the scribes --- accustomed to and pretty good at talking about holy things --- but suddenly thrust aside by this new one who 'speaks with authority'?
- Or am I most like the man with the unclean spirit -- the one who calls out Jesus for who he is --- and in that calling out demonstrates how profoundly threatened I am by this one who would 'destroy me' and so much of what I have come to at least take for granted if not actually count on?

Oh yes, surely, I can see myself in all three.

Or at least I hope I still have the capacity to be 'astounded' by the amazing gifts of God.

And if I am, in fact, one of the scribes, I hope I have the grace to step aside and turn to the one with true authority, although honestly, I'm not entirely sure.

And as for the one with the unclean spirit? The one who would rather hang on to illness than embrace the new life Jesus promises? This broken human being who is so possessed by the struggle that while he does not come seeking healing, he receives it anyway? Do you suppose that could be me most of all?

At least that's where I have found myself settling in these last days.

Oh, it makes sense to understand this one as suffering from some kind of severe mental illness and I am grateful to say this has not been my own particular journey. Even so. I have known myself to be 'possessed' by things which are less than God's intent for me. I cling to them for I know them. And even when I know they are not good for me? Oh yes, too much I cling to them still:

- My reliance on caffeine or sugar to give me a lift when I need them;
- A need to be in control;
- A fear of looking foolish;
- A need to be busy so as to be deemed of value;
- Or old grudges which still sting when I turn my attention to them.

Need I go on?

While all of the above are true, I do have to say that the last one I name is what keeps coming to mind. For you see, more than once in my life I have been party to conflict where in its wake I was unwilling to let it go. I would continue to poke at the bruise to help me remember the injustice I experienced. I would keep looking for evidence to confirm my negative opinion of the offending party. Oh yes, I would, in fact, take some measure of satisfaction in my honestly earned anger or resentment. After a time I would no longer always be able to remember what had hurt me in the first place, but I knew I had been wounded and I was not quick to move on. Oh yes, I was, in fact, 'possessed.'

Perhaps I clung to those long held grudges because they were familiar. Or maybe because I felt somehow that I 'looked better' in comparison to the other as I told the story again. Or maybe because letting them go would have meant letting go of part of what I had become. No, I am not 'possessed' by an unclean spirit, but I have known myself to be possessed by a great deal which would keep me from embracing all God intends for me.

It is so that this story is mostly about the 'authority of Jesus.' It is about recognizing Jesus as one of authenticity and power. And surely the one possessed knew this most of all, for he is the one in the story who articulates his fear that an encounter with Jesus changes everything that ever was and ever will be. He knows who Jesus is and he knows what this means.

So while I am glad I am not him, I hope that in some ways I am exactly like him. That I can still be awakened to the power of Jesus and all it means for me. And for starters, today at least I think of this in terms of how I let go of old hurts. And how an encounter with Jesus means embracing another way than what I have known. How about you?

~ Janet Hunt, [Dancing with the Word](#)

# Reflecting on the Word



## 1st Reading: [Deuteronomy 18:15-20](#)

In the name of what other gods might a false prophet speak? How can we distinguish between God's commands and what God has not commanded? Can you think of any prophets in our times? Someone you know or someone you've encountered in books, the news, and social media? How does the description of a true versus false prophet apply to the qualifications and trustworthiness of our community and religious leaders? How can Christians seek God's will when it comes to participating in national politics? How can the Church serve as the role of prophet in our culture during an election year? [Sermons that Work, Denison Church](#)

## Psalm Reading: [Psalm 111](#)

The psalmist uses a broad term for the works of God so that the audience can reflect on the wide range of God's works. Only one work is mentioned. Identify and reflect on some of God's works. How has God provided for you this past year? In verse 7, the term precepts, *piqqudim*, which means "instructions," or "procedures," is sometimes associated with the term "upright." The psalmist seems to have constructed this psalm to focus on God's precepts. While it is easy to acknowledge God's precepts are trustworthy, at times, our actions reveal that we doubt God's promises. Identify a few of these precepts, commands, and promises that you doubt are true or trustworthy. How can you grow in your trust in the promises of God? Verse 10 echoes other wisdom literature on fearing God. What does fearing God mean to you? How does reading and meditating on this psalm connect worshipers here and now with the worshipers who might have heard Moses speaking in ancient times? [Rock Church, Sermons that Work](#)

## Praying Toward Sunday

Speak with authority  
in our lives, Christ.

Speak to us,  
and to what is in us,  
so that we might be whole.

Speak to us,  
with love,  
with hope,  
and with strength,  
so that we might hear you,  
and know, deep inside,  
that we are your people,  
and that you are our God.  
Let it be so.

~ Richard Bott, [Sharing Liturgy](#)

Jesus is teaching, and a man bursts into the synagogue, tormented. Jesus turns and heals him, just as he will heal so many others of disease or disability. Then he turns back to his teaching. I'll bet people listen a little more closely after that.

Jesus was called many things, but what about "teacher?"

When you are a teacher, you are given a tremendous amount of authority. But that's not just the power to control. It's the power to form, to connect, to inspire. A good teacher notices more than just the material and the students' questions. He notices who is sick. She pays attention to the ones who come to class hungry. He asks questions if a student appears to have been abused or neglected.

We seek out those in bondage to demons, and make it our life's work to help cast them out. Jesus showed us that stopping and paying attention to their needs doesn't dilute the message of the gospel. It is the message of the gospel.

An excerpt by Melissa Bane Sevier, [Contemplative Viewfinder](#)

## 3rd Reading: [1 Corinthians 8:1-13](#)

What does this passage say to you about dietary laws, respect and religious tolerance? Are there specific examples from your campus community, workplace or multi-faith community that apply to this discussion? Do you think Paul is advocating an inclusive tolerance within the Christian community at Corinth? Why or why not? What are the implications for multicultural intra- and inter-religious relations today? [Sermons that Work](#)

## 4th Reading: [Mark 1:21-28](#)

What is the setting for this passage? Why do we suppose the authorities at the synagogue deferred to Jesus' choosing to teach? What was the response of those who heard Jesus speak? What else might those who heard have said about his teaching? What may have been the response of the scribes? What do we think people understood as an "unclean spirit" and what do we make of it? How would we explain Jesus' response to the "unclean spirit"? What was the response of the people who witnessed this event? What can we learn from an individual who can, because of their expertise, help us see things in a new light? If Jesus is our source, our expert with a new teaching, how does this kind of authority inform our lives? What new teaching does it bring forth? [Lesson Plans that Work](#)