

I

They say that your sense of smell is the one that is tied most strongly to memory. And if I think about it, I can still smell that nasty Batman T-Shirt, right this very minute.

The Batman T-shirt belonged to my friend Cody. He and I were teammates on our junior high football team, and Cody was something of a superstitious fellow. After our team won the first game of the season in something of a miracle fashion, Cody decreed that the victory was made possible by the lucky Batman T-shirt that he was wearing under his shoulderpads, and consequently, he announced that he would not wash said T-shirt until we lost a game, lest the soap and water remove the lucky mojo.

We played five more games that season. And we won them all.

And so by the end of the season, the guys who had lockers on either side of Cody's had doubled up with other teammates rather than be in anywhere near that T-shirt. Not to be too graphic, but by the end of the season, it was stiff, as if it had been starched.

At the end of the season, coach ordered the removal of the shirt from the locker room on the grounds that it presented a health code violation to the school building, and Cody's mother refused to let the shirt into her car, much less her home, so the Batman T-shirt, having fulfilled its purpose in bringing about an undefeated season, was cast into the dumpster behind the school cafeteria.

II

We live and move and have our being in a world that spends a great deal of time, money, and resources on cleaning. Think about how many feet of shelving are devoted at the grocery store to cleaning products – things with which to clean your body, your clothes, your home, your car, and the list goes on. We live and move and have our being where things get dirty and need to be cleaned, or, if they can't be cleaned, then oftentimes they're simply cast out.

III

And that leads us into our story this morning from the gospel according to Mark. Last Sunday, Carol introduced us to this genre of literature we'll be reading through the winter and into the spring called a gospel. So just to reiterate, the word "gospel" literally means, "good news."

A gospel is not a biography or a history, although all four of the gospels contain some biographical and historical details about Jesus. A gospel is persuasive writing. That is, the writers of the gospels are out to convince us, their readers, that the life, death, and resurrection of a first-century Palestinian Jew named Jesus of Nazareth is good news – namely that he is the fulfillment of God's intention of blessing for all the

families of the earth. And so this winter and spring, from now until Easter, we'll be making our way through the Gospel according to Mark.

As Carol pointed out last Sunday you won't find any mangers or magi or shepherds in the beginning of Mark's gospel. He simply announces, "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God," and then he is off to the races. Our reading for this morning picks up where Carol left off last week, a little less than halfway through the first chapter of Mark's gospel, and Jesus has already been baptized, tempted in the wilderness, begun his public ministry, and called the first disciples – and we're still only halfway through chapter one.

So listen now for a Word from God from the Gospel According to Mark, chapter 1, verses 21 through 28.

21 They went to Capernaum; and when the sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught. 22 They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes. 23 Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, 24 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." 25 But Jesus rebuked him, saying, "Be silent, and come out of him!" 26 And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him. 27 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." 28 At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.

This is the Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

Mark dispenses with the preliminaries – the baptism, the temptation, the beginning of the public ministry, the calling of the disciples – as quickly as possible, because he's in a hurry to cut to the fight scene.

The first story that Mark tells us about Jesus' public ministry is a fight scene – a public confrontation between Jesus and an unclean spirit.

But the unclean spirit knows that it's no match for Jesus, because the unclean spirit knows exactly who Jesus is. That's a theme to keep watching for in Mark's gospel. The people aren't always sure about who Jesus is or what he's about – but the unclean spirits and demons always know who he is. Right in the middle of the synagogue, the unclean spirit shrieks, I know who you are, the Holy One of God!

But Jesus is in no mood to mess around. Be silent, and come out of him! he orders. And the unclean spirit is forced to obey; it comes out with a loud voice, and then it goes the way of Cody's Batman T-shirt – banished and never to be heard from or smelled again.

And the people are amazed. “He commands even the unclean spirits and they obey him.”

Here in the industrialized, modern world, perhaps we’re a little skeptical of the very idea of unclean spirits, to say nothing of demonic possession. We are heirs of the Enlightenment after all, and we tend to chalk up these kinds of stories to an antiquated understanding of mental illness or ancient superstitions.

But have you ever heard someone say with regret, “I don’t know why I said and did that! Something just came over me!”

Have you ever shaken hands with someone and felt a little slimy after the experience – like something in that briefest of interactions that gave you a shiver, as if it wasn’t just their hand that was slimy or dirty, but their very spirit?

Our sisters and brothers who struggle with the disease of addiction know all about what it is to find themselves under the power of an unclean spirit.

So Mark opens his gospel with a confrontation between Jesus, whom Mark has identified in chapter one, verse one as the Messiah – the long-promised and long-awaited Savior, and an unclean spirit. Right from the very beginning, Mark is telling us that Jesus comes to confront all that is unclean in this world:

demons and spirits that rob people of their minds -
illnesses and injuries that rob people of their bodies –
systems of exclusion that rob people of their place in community
and systems of domination and oppression that rob communities of their peace and flourishing

IV

Jesus comes to confront all that is unclean in this world. And here’s a spoiler alert: you and I, we’re filthy.

Oh, I know we didn’t mean to be. I know you tried hard, that you’ve bathed and brushed your teeth and put on your deodorant. But deep down in your very being, you’re unclean. Your thoughts are impure, your actions are less than honorable, and your words are not always spotless. You didn’t mean to be unclean – but you can’t help it – you’re human, which means you’re prone to getting dirty, or to put it in theological terms – you’re human, which means you’re prone to sin.

But Jesus comes to confront all that is unclean in this world, including your sin and brokenness. And here’s the good news of the gospel. Your uncleanness is no match for the authority and power of Jesus, the Holy One of God.

There is no stain of yours that is beyond Christ's washing.

There is no stench of yours that is beyond Christ's cleansing.

There is no sin of yours that is beyond Christ's forgiving.

There is no death of yours that is beyond Christ's resurrecting – for even the unclean spirits obey him.

The question is, my friend, do you trust him? Are you willing to surrender your will and the care of your life completely to him? Will you let him touch you and take you by the hand and raise you up? Will you follow him wherever he may lead you?

V

And what about us, as a community of faith, as this group of disciples we call First Presbyterian Church?

We know that there is much in this world of ours that is unclean – spirits that stand against God's divine purpose and intention for the blessing and flourishing of all the families of the earth.

And a quick scan of the morning headlines can cause us to feel like the unclean spirits are winning the fight. Whatever your particular political leanings, it's safe to say that our civic discourse has become filthy.

Some in the halls of power seem to have been taken hold of by the unclean spirit of the myth of redemptive violence – of the notion that the only available response to violence is evermore violence, and consequently, our nation stands on the brink of yet another disastrous war.

Closer to home, in the sanctuaries of our nation's synagogues and mosques and churches and schools, which are meant to be places of nurture and safety and refuge, have become all too often instead places violence and bloodshed, and our government that is supposed to provide for the common defense and ensure domestic tranquility suggests that the only politically viable way to address violence and bloodshed in schools houses of worship is to equip those houses of worship with even more tools for violence and bloodshed.

Unclean spirits seem to roam about all around us. They're in the halls of government, from the Capitol in Washington to the local school board meetings down the street, to right here in this very house of worship, and if we're honest, right in the spaces of our own hearts.

It's easy to look at this world of ours and our own complicity in its sin and brokenness and come to the conclusion that the unclean spirits are winning the fight, or at least holding their own.

But Mark tells us that the very first thing that Jesus did in his public ministry was to confront the unclean spirits, and they know exactly who he is and what he's about, and they don't stand a puncher's chance against the Holy One of God.

And so our job is to proclaim that truth freely, to spread the good news about Jesus so far and so wide that people come to him from every quarter.

Our job is to align ourselves in everything we do, body and soul with this One who has come to teach with authority,

the One who has come to touch the untouchable,

the One who has come and is coming again to make all things clean and right and bright and new again,

for even the unclean spirits obey him.

Thanks be to God. Amen.