I like to keep things neat and orderly. If you look at my desk at home or at the office, you'll find that books and papers are arranged just so. The clothes in my closet are lined up logically, facing the same direction and grouped by types—not just shirts and pants, mind you, but dress and casual sections, too. Oh, and golf clothes in their own section. Even the sock drawers are systematized. Yes, I did say drawers, plural. It's a mild sickness, don't you know?!

But for all that, I perpetually fail my wife's test for housekeeping. Kim's a deep cleaner. I like to see things properly placed. But I don't see dust, apparently. Now and then she will invade the sanctuary of my spaces with her alternative authority and give it all a good scrubbing. She goes beneath the appearance of things to make things shine.

We have a story today about Jesus doing that kind of work on a man with an unclean spirit. Jesus is a deep cleaner: he exorcises the demon and sets the man free. But before we get there, there's much to look at. And it will take eyes more like Kim's than mine to see it.

Mark's Jesus gets to the bottom of things. He takes us beneath the surface. He confronts the invisible, demonic world that hides in plain sight and disrupts the intentions of God for humanity. And in doing so, he invites the faith community to join him in his ongoing work.

After being baptized in the Jordan by John the Baptist, Jesus heads north and begins to call his disciples by the Sea of Galilee. Then he goes to Simon Peter's home village, Capernaum, and enters the synagogue on the Sabbath—holy space in holy time. This is a subtle clue to what is happening.

He begins to teach, and his teaching catches their attention. It isn't so much what he says but the authority with which he says it. Now, that doesn't mean just that he had a strong gift for teaching or was especially charming in his style. It's that, unlike the pattern of the scribes who taught by referring to various interpretations of the
rabbis, Jesus gave his own interpretation. He didn’t couch what he said to show his mastery of the tradition and gain their admiration. He spoke as though he knew the meaning of these texts for the spiritual life and mission of the people of God. So, right off, the contrast is made between Jesus and the scribes.

Just then, a man with an unclean spirit speaks up. Note: he didn’t burst into the synagogue; he was already there. We aren’t told if everyone already knew that he had an unclean spirit. But he was there among them as one of them.

Now this is important because of our tendency to “other” this man right off. The good, unsuspecting worshippers are on one side with Jesus and this one oddball lunatic is threatening the peaceful assembly. If this were to happen on a normal Sunday here at Wilshire, the ushers would rush to escort him out so as not to disturb the peace. Then we’d go back to worship as usual. But we have already seen that this was not worship as usual in Capernaum that day because Jesus taught with “authority.”

So, if we’re not supposed to see this man as a weirdo to whisk away, a one-off mentally disturbed person that Jesus would deal with individually so that the good folk could get back to being good, how should we understand him as possessing an unclean spirit? I want to suggest to you that this man possessed a spirit that was also present throughout the assembly that day but was most acutely manifested in the one man. He symbolically represents the social arrangement between the oppressive Roman Empire and the complicity of the scribal authorities who had settled for a life of quiet acceptance of their domination and had lost the sense of God’s power to resist it.

Look at what the man says. What have you to do with US, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy US? Who is the US here? Isn’t he a single individual? Well, yes and no.

This man has been more thoroughly taken over by the same spirit that was present to a lesser degree in all the people gathered that day. Why him more so than others? We don’t know. But we do know that when an abusive environment exists in a family, say, there is usually an identified patient, one member of the family who takes
a disproportionate amount of the abuse and internalizes it. It’s not that only that person is sick, though; the whole family is afflicted. The individual needs to be set free from this unclean spirit, but so does the family.

Look how the man with the unclean spirit speaks. He speaks first in the plural and then the singular. That is, he speaks as if he is representing a spirit that has taken them all hostage. He is no longer defined by his own unique voice but by the voice of the oppressive force that has taken control of him. And when he does use the singular—*I know who you are, the Holy One of God*—it’s as if he speaks now in the collective voice of that invisible power that is in mortal conflict with the invisible God.

This is the nature of the demonic. It lurks in ideologies and systems of oppression. It hides in plain sight. It speaks in a way that makes sense in one sense to everyone who is wittingly or unwittingly caught up in it. Until, that is, the Holy One shows us how to speak with authority and break its grip on the minds of the people.

Is this not what we are seeing in our American churches today? We have some among us whom we have known for years but who have been seemingly taken over by spirits that have changed them. They have imbibed the false narrative of Christian nationalism or American exceptionalism or white supremacy or cultural entitlement to the point that we hardly know them anymore.

The Southern Baptist research group, LifeWay, released the results of a study this week that found that in churches of more than 250 people, 61% of pastors said they are dealing with members who are spouting conspiracy theories. *While hundreds of people stormed the Capitol*, the report says, *there are millions of Americans who share their views. There is no doubt: The United States has a serious problem with pathological political delusions.* It continued pessimistically: *Once people have gone far enough down the rabbit hole of conspiratorial thinking, it can be nearly impossible to get them back out.*

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1 https://baptistnews.com/article/half-of-pastors-say-their-congregants-are-spreading-conspiracy-theories/#.YBTRVi1h1qt
Nearly, impossible, but not impossible. Wherever Jesus is present, deliverance is possible.

And I want to hasten to say—not because I just want to be fair and balanced, but because it is true, that it’s not just the far-right radical element of Christians that is susceptible. We all are, even people with a more progressive view of politics and theology. Rome, so to speak, seeks domination of everyone and everything. Groupthink is dangerous and demonic, whether from the right or left. It robs people of compassion for others and divides us from one another. We all need to be delivered and set free.

Jesus rebukes the unclean spirit and casts it out of the man. Which is something the community had not done itself because they lost touch with the power of God to identify and defeat the demonic.

But the unclean spirit wasn’t cleansed easily. It came out convulsing and crying loudly. This is because it had such a foothold on the man’s personality.

James Baldwin said that people are trapped in history and history is trapped in them. We see that with racism—Blacks as well as whites. We internalize it all until we can’t even see that it’s there, let alone get free of it. It has taken residence in us. The rabbis said this about the Israelites after they left Egyptian slavery: You can get the people out of Egypt but it’s harder to get Egypt out of the people.

So, how do we do this? First, trust the power and presence of Jesus among us that is always trying to free us and never leaves us helpless.

Second, recognize that we all need his deliverance. When we see someone who seems to be far gone in our eyes, see ourselves in that person. Don’t write off the person and act as if we are fine and the problem is only with him or her. We will never come together and experience salvation and renewed community if we scapegoat others and demonize them as the enemy while letting ourselves off the hook.

Third, we can’t settle for worship without dangerous encounter with the presence of God. We need word and deed, enlightenment and exorcism, illumination and transformation.
We need Jesus to shake us and change us—all of us, even if that is uncomfortable. The church has to address the demonic within the community with honest interrogation of our hearts if we are to live as free people.

Finally, address those who are most disturbed among us with power and grace at the same time. See beneath the surface to find the tender humanity in them.

Jesus isn’t satisfied with being among nice people who have adjusted to the cultural and political powers that hold us hostage. He goes deep and he calls us to join him.

Thomas Troeger wrote a hymn on this passage that carries the truth of it: “Silence, frenzied, unclean spirit!” cried God’s healing Holy One. “Cease your ranting! Flesh can’t bear it. Flee as night before the sun.”

At Christ’s words the demon trembled, from its victim madly rushed, while the crowd that was assembled stood in wonder, stunned and hushed. Amen.