

Healing Interruptions

In my first sermon at my internship parish of St. Mark's, Hampton, I was preaching on the story in St. Mark's gospel about the widow who gave to God her last two coins which were all she had in the world. I was sharing from my own experience a time of financial hardship when I had been unexpectedly laid off from my job of ten years. I talked about awakening at 3 am in a cold sweat, paralyzed with fear and wondering what would become of the two of us--my teenage daughter and me, if I could not find a good job. I referred to these moments as my 3 a.m. "bag lady fears".

Just as I began to describe how reliance on God had helped me conquered fear, there was a commotion at the back of the church. A homeless man named James came wandering into the sanctuary, talking loudly to himself. He shambled over to a pew, made as if to sit, thought better of it and left. Then, at the 10:30 service, James was back again, walking in at exactly same place in the sermon. Now, St. Mark's had been preparing to host Nights Welcome Inn for the homeless in the Hampton-Rhodes community. So there was no doubt in any of our minds that James' appearances had been a prompting of the Holy Spirit reminding us, better than any sermon could, what the church's responsibility was to James and to many others like him.

In today's gospel there is different sort of interruption. Jesus is teaching in the synagogue at the very beginning of his ministry. So possibly the very last thing Jesus expected was to be interrupted by the appearance of a man possessed of a collection

of demons right in the middle of the synagogue, a place of strict observance and ritual cleanliness.

Yet, the arrival on the scene of this tortured man ended up being Jesus' teaching. In juxtaposition, Jesus, the who was God inside, confronts a man with demons squatting inside him. As the members of the synagogue look on amazed, by the power and authority of the Word, Jesus casts them out.

By his words, Jesus brought about the healing which freed a man from the bondage of evil. So Jesus' authority was not just in the saying, but in the doing—an exercise of *exousia*—in the Greek--divine power.

For the bystanders in the synagogue that day, this was a new thing—a new doctrine, demonstrated by the man from Nazareth who could literally speak healing into being, just as God, the creator, *spoke* creation into being. God's Word, incarnate in Jesus Christ, was now present and active in their world. And, although no one could know it at the time, the world would never be the same.

In the first century, a man possessed of demons interrupted Jesus' first teaching in the synagogue at Capernaum, making it possible for people to know the healing power of God. In Hampton, Virginia in 2009, a homeless man twice interrupted a sermon at St. Mark's Church, because there was something God wanted his people in today's world to remember about healing.

And here at St. Martin's in 2012, that healing power of Christ's word is still active among us, not just with one another, but as part of this congregation's outreach

ministries—working with organizations such as Avalon, which shelters and counsels abused women; or Literacy for Life, which opens up the power of the written word to those who do not know it. The people of St. Martin's are Christ's hearts and hands in the world. Those who are helped by our outreach ministry are not here today...but in a very real sense they are here. There is a homeless man, a battered woman, a hungry child, a person struggling with addiction, someone who cannot read, or a person with a mental illness sitting right here in the pews beside us each Sunday. In churches everywhere, the needs of the world break in on us, as they should. And as we take Christ's healing out of this place into our community, the people to whom we minister in his name are in a real sense here with us when we worship. The needs of the world are not interruptions, they are part of our life in Christ.

Across time, the words of Jesus of Nazareth which called out the demons from the possessed man, have had the power to free the world from the bondage of evil, corruption, and sickness. When we pay attention and heed the interruptions and promptings of the Holy Spirit, God's Word can continue to guide St. Martin's and the wider Church to make the world a place free from fear and full of healing—and we do this together, one person in the pews at a time.