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by Pat Marrin

[View Author Profile](#)

[patrickjmarrin@gmail.com](mailto:patrickjmarrin@gmail.com).

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“What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth?” (Mark 1:24).

### **Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time**

*Deut 18:15-20; Ps 95; 1 Cor 7:32-35; Mark 1:21-28*

Ched Myers' classic 1988 book, *Binding the Strong Man*, offers a convincing exegesis of one of Mark's basic themes, that from the start of his ministry Jesus demonstrated the coming of God's Kingdom as the defeat and displacement of the power of Satan over the world. Jesus' first miracle is the expulsion of unclean spirits from a possessed man in the synagogue in Capernaum. Jesus has power over all evil spirits because he has defeated the Source of evil.

In Mark 3:27, Jesus explains his power with a short parable about how it is only possible to plunder a house if you first bind up the strong man within. He has done exactly this to Satan, and with each exorcism he performs, the departing spirits acknowledge his superior power. The crowds are awed by every healing miracle, but they are especially amazed by Jesus' authority over evil spirits, thought to inhabit and control every aspect of their lives. Jesus is no ordinary healer; he is filled with God's Holy Spirit.

It is important to note in Mark's Gospel that the unclean spirits Jesus confronts in Capernaum do not lurk in some disreputable place but dwell undetected in the synagogue, the locus of religious authority in the community. Jesus' first opponents are not in the taverns or other dens of iniquity, but in a house of worship. The scribes and Pharisees who rush from Jerusalem to examine Jesus realize that he is

not mounting a moral crusade against tax collectors and prostitutes or other notorious public sinners, but confronting the authority of the religious establishment, where evil has long found accommodation in the compromises and corruption within every culture of power.

There can be no reform of society without spiritual renewal. Jesus initiates his revolution of the heart by first expelling every unclean spirit. Only an interior purification and transparency can expose and root out the hidden causes of social distortion, deception and hypocrisy. Where real authority is lacking, lies, manipulation, fear and anxiety fill the vacuum. While most modern minds dismiss the notion of spiritual forces at work, we still witness the insidious effects of nameless, faceless agents that shape public opinion and inspire destructive behaviors with impunity and no accountability. The terms “unclean spirit” or “evil” describe well some of the poisonous ideas injected into the culture that run their course before they lose appeal.

The Word of God is the antidote to this poison, moving like a two-edged sword between the marrow and the bone, exposing the secrets of the heart. Our summons to truth and purity begins with the grace of repentance and the humility to root out our own faults and prejudices before we can engage the sins of others. The authority and name of Jesus abide where other spirits are displaced. This is what Jesus of Nazareth has to do with us.

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