

**Sermon: Rev. Amanda Henderson Bolton**

**Sunday, October 27, 2024**

**Kirk of St. James**

As many of you know I love Halloween, as the manse lawn next door demonstrates! Growing up in rural NS every October 31<sup>st</sup> had us piling into the car with our unicef boxes and visiting each home in the village. Chats, home made cookies and popcorn balls, mittens—it was always a wonderful time. Except maybe for Dad because each year our mailbox inevitably ended up in the river (along with many others!). Most years around this time I tend to do a service on All Saints but I thought this year I would do something a little different, and do All Saints next week.

Now I live with a huge Stepen King fan, my husband Chad has read all his books, and he also likes scary movies. My tolerance for scary movies peaks at about the level of Garfield’s Halloween and the ghost pirates. It is not my thing at all. A few years ago I spoke about Zombies, the bible and popular culture. I thought this year we might look at another theme that runs through a lot of scary movies—exorcism. Within the New Testament in particular there are a number of narratives that deal with things like possession or demons. While that sounds odd to our modern ears, it was something that was not uncommon in the ancient world. As writing and artifacts can attest there were practices and beliefs around this topic.

In Mark 1, Jesus has come to Capernaum and upon his arrival this dirty, naked, demon-possessed man hurls himself at Jesus’ feet. Unexpectedly, before Jesus even gets a word out, the man who is supposedly speaking on behalf of these demons, cries out, “What do you have to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth?” Now, before we go any further, we should pause here to remember that in those days, people often didn’t have last names. Instead they were identified by another things—such as their profession or place of origin. For example, you have “Joseph, the carpenter.” Or Mary of Magdala (which we have of course shortened to Mary Magdalene). Or look at who we now call Judas Iscariot. Iscariot in

Hebrew means “a man of Kerioth, which is a city of Judah. Judas from Kerioth. Other times, people would be identified as being the son of someone – Simon BenJonah for example, literally means Simon, son of Jonah.

Here is the first clue in our story today that something important is about to happen. How does the demon-filled man address Jesus? The spirits call him by his true name; they say to him – “We know who you are – the Holy One of God! Even the demons recognize the power of God before them. But there’s more going on here than this simple recognition. To understand what’s going on in Mark 1, we need to understand the context of ancient exorcisms and the importance that names played in exorcisms. In those days, exorcists who travelled the countryside performing exorcisms, usually carried little scrolls with chants scrawled on them. And depending on the spirit you encountered, that would influence which chant you would use to cast out the demon. So what really helped, is if you knew the unclean spirit’s name. Once you had the demon’s name, you could insert it into your rhetoric, which in turn was believed to increase the chances of a successful exorcism. But it worked the other way too. If the demon knew the name of the exorcist, then chances of successful exorcism were low.

An example of this can be found in Acts 19:14-20 which records the account of Sceva's seven sons "14 Seven sons of a Jewish high priest named Sceva were doing this. 15 But the evil spirit said to them in reply, “Jesus I know, and Paul I know; but who are you?” 16 Then the man with the evil spirit leaped on them, mastered them all, and so overpowered them that they fled out of the house naked and wounded. 17 When this became known to all residents of Ephesus, both Jews and Greeks, everyone was awestruck; and the name of the Lord Jesus was praised. 18 Also many of those who became believers confessed and disclosed their practices. 19 A number of those who practiced magic collected their books and burned them publicly; when the value of these books[b] was calculated, it was found to come to fifty thousand silver coins. 20 So the word of the Lord grew mightily and prevailed."

Therefore in Mark when the demons say Jesus' name, what they are really doing is trying to threaten him. What they're really saying is, "We know who you are Jesus. We know your name. You cannot get rid of us. You have no power over us." Of course, they're wrong. Jesus commands them to leave the person they reside in and they have no choice. Jesus has authority over them. In Mark 1, Jesus doesn't even need to know the demons' name; he just says "Scram, get away from here." And they obey. This changes everything; disciples of Christ no longer try to discover the demon's name; instead they just use the name of Christ. This is part of the reason why Jesus later tells his followers to go out into the world in his name. Because his name has authority. His name has power. His name is not just a word.

The gospel of Mark is written in a way that almost immediately begins to point toward the power of Jesus and his identity as the son of God. There are a number of miracle stories that follow one after the other and the general thrust of the narratives is the need to have faith in Jesus. He later demonstrates his authority over the forces of nature in the stilling of the storm and, his authority over the powers of evil by healing the demoniac; therefore the need to have faith in him becomes all the more compelling.<sup>1</sup> In the raising of Jairus' daughter from the dead, Jesus also demonstrates his authority over death. Jesus has authority on earth over the chaotic forces of nature and evil as demonstrated throughout Mark and these miracles attest to his identity and authority.

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<sup>1</sup> Craig A. Evans. *The Bible Knowledge Background Commentary Matthew-Luke*. (Colorado Springs, Colorado: Cook Communications Ministries, 2003), 198.