

Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany
January 28, 2018
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Stranger Things

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, Amen.

In this generation of streaming television series, you may have heard of one that has captured many people's imagination called *Stranger Things*. It is a science fiction, horror story that taps into our fascination with the supernatural and our human response to fears of what we don't understand. Set in a small town in middle America, the story unfolds from the perspective of a group of children as they search for their missing friend. More apt to believe in the monsters they see, these heroes are the first to know what is really happening to this little town.

Perhaps boredom with reality television or the need to escape our own adult sensibilities has fascinated and drawn a large following to this series. The story tweaks those childlike fears of creatures under the bed and strange events we dismiss as coincidence or overactive imaginations. Whatever the draw we are invited to suspend what we believe, to encounter the supernatural.

Today's gospel reading from Mark is a story that rarely gets its due attention. It is the first story of supernatural healing that occurs in Jesus' ministry. While we might focus on the point of Jesus' teaching in the temple with authority and the response of those in power, we cannot miss this encounter between the demon and the divine. Our modern perspective would explain away this man as mentally ill or perhaps experiencing a seizure as his body convulses and he is freed from possession. But I think our need to intellectually conquer what we do not understand may also blind us to the vulnerabilities of our humanity, our need for God, and the supernatural power that is available to all of us.

In an era where healing ministry is often associated with TV evangelists and flamboyant histrionics, modern mainline churches often gloss over these stories of supernatural encounters. We consider this exorcism story in light of its historical context, rather than grapple with the notion of evil in our times or lives.

There are so many things that happen in the world that we cannot explain or understand unless we consider that evil exists. I don't think you have to believe in a personified devil to acknowledge the forces that inspire evil actions. We can easily be possessed by things or attitudes that can harm us or others. We can easily become misguided. Maybe we believe we have overcome our fears or have white knuckled our way to right behaviors and on any given Sunday we hold Christ at arm's length. That which possesses us may quietly whisper, what have you to do with me Jesus of Nazareth? But when "the lights are out" so to speak in our lives, we are reminded of our vulnerability.

This gospel reading suggests that the word of God has much power and authority, even over evil. At the beginning of his ministry, with his new followers at his side, Jesus entered the synagogue in Capernaum. He taught with authority and displayed a new power of healing and liberation for one who was suffering.

Jesus' words were powerful and effective, and more than his words, his actions displayed the in-breaking of God's kingdom into the world. God's hope and healing were meant for all, even this one others considered unclean. Jesus freed a man from all that would rob him of abundant life and we can trust that Jesus will restore us to wholeness. This is the word of hope in our gospel today. Jesus confronts the creatures hidden under our beds and promises that if we trust in his love our demons can be exorcised.

Now maybe this language sounds archaic, but I think in our mainline traditions, we have watered down the message. We have not allowed the potential of the supernatural to be in us, to be in our prayers. Afraid of our own vulnerabilities, we dismiss the power of evil and also the supernatural strength God offers. Our prayers can be powerful and effective, and as we pray for one another, we invoke the capacity of Christ to be in us.

As the body of Christ we are called to claim that power and courage to work for other's freedom from oppression, addiction, from hunger, from abuse of power, from discrimination, from all that robs others of dignity and hope. The church is a place where we can gather in Christ's name to support one another in confronting those forces that possess us. The supernatural power of God lives within us as we yield our lives to Christ.

Like those youngsters in *Stranger Things*, so willing to confront the evil forces they encountered, we must trust that Christ will stand with and for us against all that keeps us in bondage. If we suspend our disbelief, we may notice forces at work that others cannot see. Evil is insidious, hiding under our beds until the darkness comes. Christ's light overcomes this darkness and can have ultimate authority of our lives.

Through the season of Epiphany we witness an unfolding revelation of who Christ was and is to the world. Before we leave Epiphany behind, take a moment to reflect upon the ways Christ's supernatural power has been revealed to you. Consider how this revelation informs your actions as you go out from this place. We all love a good overcomes evil story. This can be our story too. Perhaps you are being prepared to do battle with forces that would imprison others. *Stranger things* have happened, we just didn't notice until we claimed the supernatural power of Christ that lives in all of us.