

## Sermon for the Fourth Sunday After the Epiphany: Mark 1:21-28

The Rev. Brooks Cato

Once in a while, I'm lucky enough to show off our church building to someone who's never been here. As you might imagine, that happens less often these days, but I did give a quick tour last week. The Health Department was here to see if they could use St. Thomas' as a vaccination site, and they needed a good understanding of the layout to help make their decision. Now, I know that, as soon as I said the word "vaccination," everyone's brain went off on its own little field trip. Some of y'all got excited, some of y'all worried, some of y'all are trying to figure out the logistics of St. T's as a MASH unit. But the point of this sermon is not vaccines, it's something else altogether. So, I'll give us all a second to dwell on those thoughts before we bring it back in. All good? Ok, so, those folks were walking around the Parish Hall, stepping out measurements, spit-balling ideas of traffic flow, and where, exactly, a wheelchair might come through without bugging up the lines. After they took a cellphone recording of the riveting video of what it's like to walk through that building, I offered to show them the church, in case it might be useful, too. We rushed from the Parish Hall to this side door, and I bolted right in followed in short order by one of 'em. The other paused and jokingly said, "Now, I'm not gonna catch fire when I walk through there, am I?" Of course, I laughed, and reassured them. I've seen a lot of folks come and go from churches, and I've yet to see a single person display even the tiniest wisp of smoke. Well, no wisps of smoke outside of incense, blown-out candles, and that one acolyte whose ponytail got a little too close to the torch I was holding. Otherwise, though, I've seen really fine folks and really terrible moments inside our sanctuaries, and never once have I seen the slightest hint of spontaneous human combustion. This might've been too much for our guest, but they humored me, and the rest of the tour went off without a spark.

So, here's the thing. You know how every profession has a set of jokes that other well-meaning folks think are funny to say, but they hear all the time? Like, if you go to a barber and say, "I'm just here to get my ears lowered." or to waitstaff asking how you'd like your steak, "rare enough that it'll get up and eat my salad." Well, this "if I walk in the church, I'll probably burst into flames" comment is one of those for priests. I hear it a lot. It doesn't bother me at all. It's just another way for people to make a connection. In fact, I kinda think of it as a way to diffuse nerves or a bit of awkwardness. So I've come up with a few go-to responses to keep the nerve-reduction going and help put 'em at ease. You heard one already, the whole "I've never seen it happen yet," response. Sometimes, I'll add a little to the end with a playfully ominous, "but there's always a first time," and then I watch them intently as they step across the threshold. "Dang, I was hoping that this would be it." I also like the slightly more macabre, "well, if you do that's why we have fire insurance." Most of the time they laugh. Usually they look at me like they didn't know priests were allowed to tell jokes. But it's funny to me that all these heathens and good folks alike have such a developed sense of the sacredness of place that they're worried that their presence alone might sully it. I can't tell you how many times this whole trope has actually led to some really cool conversations about welcome and safety and what the Episcopal Church is about and of course, ultimately, God.

In our Bible Study Thursday, we talked about what makes spaces feel sacred, even if you don't really know what the sacredness means. And that's striking. When we go into those spaces -- even if it's a place that isn't for our quote-unquote "team" -- we feel that sacredness. A mosque feels like it's sacred, even if you aren't Muslim. A Buddhist temple feels sacred. The Senate Gallery does. When I was a kid, even the livestock auction floor did, too. There was something in all those places, just like in our churches, that had that feeling. Most of the time, when you walk in, you don't have to be told that it's sacred. You just know it, somewhere in your chest, somewhere in the way your body changes, somewhere inside, you know. This place is set aside for people to be at their most vulnerable, their most hopeful, their most human. And I guess there's something

about that that's actually kinda scary. I don't mean scary in the sense of horror movie scary. I mean scary in the sense that there's a really good chance that the divine or even, heaven-forbid, another human being, might see you for who you really are. Actually, now that I say it out loud, maybe that does hit the same center of our brains as a horror movie. The threat is different, but the end result is very real. Your fear, your soul, your very self is laid bare, and while that may not lead to physical harm, it certainly demands a loss.

In all the times I've introduced people to a church building, all those times I've seen folks with dark eyeliner and tattoos or unwashed layers of coats and fingerless gloves or family heirloom pearls and authentic mink-skin coats, all those times I've seen folks cross the threshold and not burst into flames, I've always tried to extend welcome in whatever way I can. I've always tried to reassure them that it's going to be ok, that they're going to be ok. That this building won't bite, and neither will its people. And yes, that's true. But it's not entirely true. These sort of spaces do demand something of us. Even kids get it. They may run around and test just how loud their voices'll echo off the rafters, but give them a chance, and they'll see it. I know of a very little kid who made his mother come into this building, made her take off her shoes when they stepped in, ran up and down the aisles like crazy, then sat in silence on that back pew with his little, socked feet dangling over the vent. She asked him what he was doing, and he shushed her, saying, "Mom, you need to be quieter. This is God's house." We feel that sense of reverence, that need to be a little hushed not because it's oppressive but because it's magnificent, even has a sense of comfort, like being held close.

In Jesus' day, the temple was all those things, too. It was magnificent, it was safe, it pointed your being toward God even before you stepped inside. And I'm sure those rabbis and priests heard their fair share of whatever the first-century equivalent jokes were. When Jesus walks in, they expect the same communal gatherings, the same routine of whatever business the people need to tend to, the same prayers, same conversations, same rote responses. They're surprised by how Jesus teaches, but they can't be surprised that this would be a place where teaching happens. Even that's kind of normal, it's just who is doing the teaching -- and just how good his teaching is -- that's surprising. But it doesn't end there. Jesus goes on and surprises them again when a man speaks up and asks what business Jesus has doing what he's doing. What strikes me is who this guy is. It's not just some random character piping up from the congregation. He's a man "with an unclean spirit." But even then, when scripture itself says this guy was possessed, even then, he wasn't tormented for it when he came into the presence of God. He was welcomed. He heard Christ's teaching. And when that unclean spirit got the best of him, he had that troubling thing weighing on his soul cast out.

We're so afraid of what might happen to us, how we might embarrass ourselves, or who we might offend when we go into new spaces. We're worried we won't stand at the right time or know just exactly how we're supposed to act. We're so worried about all those incredibly human things mostly because of what other humans will think of us. But if we're honest with ourselves, and if we can remember back to a time when we were uncomfortable in church, we also worry about what God will think of us. We may not even have to go back to then. Many of us worry about what God thinks of us right now! But look at that story again, look where it happens. Jesus and the man with the unclean spirit aren't strolling down the road. They're not on some mountain or in a boat on the Sea of Galilee, though God knows Jesus could've gotten to him there, too. This story, this unclean man, this is right there in the Temple. He didn't burst into flames when he walked in. He wasn't kicked out because there was something wrong with him. He was welcomed, sat among all the good people, given a seat before God. And not a soul showed him the door when he acted up. Makes me wonder how many times this sort of thing happened before, how many times this same guy came into that sacred place and sat among all those good people and had his spirit get the best of him with some outburst in the middle of a sermon. But none of that, none of who he was or how he was mattered. He was welcome in that sacred place. But by going there, he did lose something. There was a threat to part of who he was. That threat was the

sacredness surrounding him. I said earlier that while sacred spaces are safe, they do demand a loss of you. It's not a loss of who you are, but it is a loss, and if we're honest with ourselves, it's a loss of something that needs losing. For that man what was lost was that unclean spirit that weighed heavy on him.

For us, well, I can't tell you what it is because it's different for each of us. Some weight we carry, some worry that hounds us, some hubris or arrogance or habit we just can't let go of. And maybe that's the thing that really makes sacred spaces so unnerving. It's like Job standing before the whirlwind or Jonah crouched under a shade tree. I can't tell you what it is you carry that weighs so heavy, what you carry that shrinks or winces when you enter the presence of God. What it was the first time you felt it or what it's turned into now. I can't tell you, because it's different for each of us. But what I can tell you is that the very thing that makes you hesitate to go before God because you're afraid that God might see it, the very thing that makes you pause at the threshold of the sacred on the off chance that the thing will win out, that is exactly what sacred space demands of you. When the sacredness of a place overtakes us, it's not ourselves that are cast out, it's that stuff that weighs us down.

Now, I know that sounds kinda alright. Like, wouldn't it be nice to have my cares set aside and all my worries erased? Sure. But the truth is, most of us, don't actually want to let those things go. Or we want to, and we don't know how. Or we want to and we know how, but we can't imagine what life would be like without them. Or we want to and we know how and we can imagine life without them, but we can't figure out what would fill the hole it leaves behind. We have a weird way of getting attached to those things that harm us, and it's scary to imagine losing them, even if we know it'd be for the best to let them go. Well, that's what sacred space does. That's what coming into the presence of God does. And it's what rising before Christ and letting him see our true and full selves does. It's scary stuff, absolutely it is. When most of us think of church, we think of friendly faces and potluck casseroles and good music. But for folks that haven't experienced church in a while or who've been here forever but never fully themselves, y'all, it's daunting and powerful and downright scary.

In the last year, we've felt the loss of our church, we all have. But I wonder how much of that is the loss of what this place demands of us. I suspect the first time we all come back here in-person, it'll be a joyful but also a mighty heavy experience. But I also wonder if right now offers us an opportunity. As helpful as Zoom is, we all know it doesn't carry the same weight as being in church in-person does. We know that. It's not the full experience. But I wonder if that's something we can use to our advantage. Our space is so powerful that it can freak people out to even think about crossing our threshold. But Zoom? You can still get a sense of who we are and what we're about on here without having to cross into a physical space, especially one that demands something of you. So I wonder if it's easier to invite someone to join us for a service now? I wonder if we can use this time to get people used to us so that when we come back in-person, they'll be a little more willing to take that step, to risk coming before God. And maybe it's working on us, too! We're all coming to church from the comfort of our own homes. I don't expect many of us will wear bathrobes the first time we're back in the building, but I wonder if our souls will be primed to be a little more open. Like, how relaxed are we coming to God from our living rooms? And can we bring that same relaxed, guard-down posture when we walk back through these doors again?

Will this change us? Yes. I am certain that worshipping on Zoom already has. But I can't wait to see what's being cast out. I can't wait to see what we bring of ourselves, who we bring when we come back together. I can't wait to see new little squares on these calls, and when the time comes, new folks making those same nervous jokes for the first time. I can't wait to bring all this and more, with fear and joy and vulnerability, I can't wait to bring all this into this sacred space with you, with whoever's out there, with whoever comes here. I can't wait to cross the threshold of God with all that and watch it change.