



Liberated by a Mighty Word

January 31, 2021: The Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany

The Rev. Nicholas M. Morris-Kliment

Christ Episcopal Church, Needham, MA

Oh Lord, to whom the dark and the light are both alike: may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be always acceptable in Your sight, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

We in the United States are obsessed with cleanliness. When we go to the aisles of Sudbury Farms, have we noticed how many different kinds of dish soap there are to choose from? Or soap for your dishwasher? That's *different* from the kind we use to wash our dishes with our hands. How many kinds of laundry detergent are there? How about cleaning products for floors? tables? counter tops? toilets? dogs? air? ovens? Do we need something harsh, with chlorine bleach in it? Or will something gentle, with lemon grass and vinegar, do?

And when it comes to our bodies, Americans are in a class by ourselves. If you've ever been abroad, you know what I mean. We are quick to judge how natives of other countries smell and wonder how often they bathe. Again, our grocery store and pharmacy aisles are choked with products to clean our bodies and make them smell better. If we have ever been in close proximity with teenaged boys, we may well have had the experience of being enveloped by great plumes of a body spray called Axe.

The Biblical writers would not have understood our preoccupation with daily, bodily cleanliness. While there was a bias against visible skin diseases like leprosy, and a prejudice against women experiencing their natural fertility cycles, our forebears in faith were much more concerned with spiritual hygiene.

In the Gospel of Mark, Jesus goes right after spiritual dirt. After his baptism and calling friends into discipleship, he moves to Capernaum, a town by the Sea of Galilee, and joins the synagogue there, apparently with permission to teach. No sooner does Jesus begin his first sermon than a man in spiritual distress in the congregation interrupts him. Or rather, the text indicates that an "unclean spirit" residing in the man was doing the talking. Other translations say an "evil spirit." By the mere power of his words, his rebuke, it is as if Jesus grabs the howling spirit by the scruff of the neck, dislodges it from its hapless, flopping, human host, and hurls it into oblivion.

Now as moderns, we may get stuck here in a number of ways. We may recall the first time we saw the film "The Exorcist," and the spectacle of Linda Blair. Or we may feel more comfortable medicalizing this scene: what we have here is clearly an undiagnosed case of schizophrenia. Or, having read about the genocides like the one in Rwanda or the one in Nazi dominated Europe, or chattel slavery in this country, to pick just a few examples close at hand, we may acknowledge the presence and activity of evil in the world, that while not a personal force, is a real and murderous force nonetheless; or like psychiatrist M. Scott Peck in his book People of the Lie, we may personalize it in individual human beings. Or we may accept what the Gospel describes at face value, even though we may not have first-hand experience of such a nightmare.

However we explain it, the fact remains: in this story, a human being held in impossible bondage has been liberated by the power of Jesus Christ, who names the cause of the bondage, and casts it out.



Liberated by a Mighty Word

January 31, 2021: The Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany

The Rev. Nicholas M. Morris-Kliment

Christ Episcopal Church, Needham, MA

Whatever we may hold to be true about the metaphysical or literal reality of unclean spirits, in this story they at least represent the realm of things beyond our control which lead to death.

What are the things permeating our lives that are beyond our control and lead to death? What are the things in the air that defile the image of God in us and those around us?

It's not hard to move right to the pandemic: beyond our control, in so many ways; and leading to death, of so many kinds. Consider the chains of economic and social inequality laid bare by the pandemic, against which we feel helpless, liberation from those chains being central to the Gospel message; Consider addictions—to alcohol, drugs, food, work, any substance or activity that becomes an idol taking over our lives—leading to death of body or spirit or both; Consider racial or political or cultural hatred, gender discrimination, or any other kind of bias that chains us in hate; Consider intractably difficult relationships or work situations or yes, crippling mental or physical illness or disease that leads to the death of body and spirit.

Even today, Jesus addresses these chains with a mighty word, sometimes dramatically, as in the Gospel text. The other day I was reminded of this while reading a book called Dear Church: A Love Letter from a Black Preacher to the Whitest Denomination in the U.S. (by the way, that's the Lutherans, not Episcopalians). The author is a recovering alcoholic, and he recounts the precise date and place where Jesus liberated him, freeing him to take the road away from death to life. He was standing at the back of a concert, when a voice said to him, "You are getting sober today." He had never been a Christian, but there was no doubt in his mind that the voice was that of Jesus of Nazareth. He writes that, "filled with a confidence I had never known, I walked out of that show right then and checked in at the nearest hospital for alcohol withdrawal." (Dear Church, p. 37)

For most of us, it doesn't often happen that way, but it can and does. For most of us, like the green seasons of Epiphany and Ordinary Time in the Church year (more than half the year in liturgical time) our journey toward freedom takes place over the long haul, begun by Jesus' word, requiring frequent trips to his powerful well of grace, for long drinks of mercy and strength. I've seen people set free by the power of Jesus to be joyful in the midst of debilitating, chronic pain; to begin healing in a marriage; to stay sober one day at a time; to keep at the hard work of living, relieved of despair if not of hardship; to keep striving, without bitterness, for justice and peace for all.

For sure, Jesus seeks after us, but I think we also need to seek after him. It's notable that his first act of power takes place in a synagogue. The man with the unclean spirit got himself to Church, so to speak. Of course, that means literal, virtual church; but also, prayer on our own and with others; service to and with others and creation; fellowship and conscious encouragement from others on our same path; reading and study of Scripture and spiritual books; seeking and experiencing God in the joy of hobbies and activities and relationships which bring us unalloyed delight and satisfaction—all of these are places where Jesus can and does speak his liberating word to set us free.



Liberated by a Mighty Word

January 31, 2021: The Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany

The Rev. Nicholas M. Morris-Kliment

Christ Episcopal Church, Needham, MA

The other day I came across the review of a book about cleanliness, called Clean: The New Science of Skin. The book begins with these words: “Five years ago, I stopped showering.” It turns out that despite renouncing deodorants and all manner of skin cleansers he was fine—and he didn’t smell too bad, either. (Yale Alumni Monthly, November/December 2020, p. 61)

May we tend less to our outsides, and more to our insides, where Jesus can liberate us all with his powerful word, to serve one another and the world.

Amen.