

“Toto, we’re not in Kansas anymore…” Well thanks Dorothy! I could have told you that! Perhaps the most iconic and quoted line from the movie, “The Wizard of Oz,” Dorothy states the obvious of what everyone who has been watching already knows. A whirlwind; chaos, destruction, rubble, wreckage. A twister of epic proportions has uprooted Dorothy, Toto, her childhood home—the wooden planks of wall and floor creaking and groaning, swirling and whirling far from Kansas, far from the safety of a sheltered childhood of apple pie and picket fences. And at last she is plunked down with a rafter-rattling thud right in the middle of a foreign place. A place where evil meets her right outside her front door—or beneath it as the case may be with one Wicked Witch of the East. “Ding, Dong, the witch is dead!” Well, at least this one…

And whether OZ is literally hundreds of miles from Kansas or whether the journey is metaphorical, it is blatantly obvious that the life Dorothy once had has been left far behind. And by the time her adventure is over, the Dorothy that was is left behind too. Truth is when you come face to face with the reality of evil, you can’t just click your shiny red shoes and return from whence you came. Even as she returns to her home, she is not the same naïve little girl she was. Dorothy isn’t in Kansas anymore.

Such is the whirlwind of Mark’s gospel. From the very first verse, swirling, whirling, uprooting, transporting us; barely a moment for our house to touch down and land. John the Baptist in the wilderness. Jesus baptized. The heavens torn open. Jesus immediately driven out into the wilderness where he meets evil face to face personified and incarnate in a devil who is not wearing red tights or red shoes. And by

the way there were angels and wild animals too. Then without notice of how we got there, suddenly we are by the Sea of Galilee. “Follow me,” Jesus says. And caught up in the whirlwind four fishermen immediately leave their nets and follow. All this, and we are only half way through the very first chapter. And right in the very next verse, we are whisked away again. To Capernaum—ok, still on the north shore of Galilee. But as far away from the life of a fisherman as you can get. Disciples plunked right down in the middle of the synagogue, the middle of religious leaders, and the scrutiny of what that might mean. And they can’t just click their heels and go back. Because evil personified; walking, talking fear is about to meet them face to face. Well, what did you expect? It’s pretty obvious we’re not in Galilee anymore. Let’s pray.

We were in Capernaum on the north shore of the sea, the north shore and the sea I have fished all my life. And it was where Jesus called me, “Follow me.” And I did. The story written would say I left nets and boat and the fisherman’s life behind—well, we were only a few miles down a dusty road. I could have gone back any day I wanted. In truth, we did. Even after the call to follow we would often be found in our boats, out on the open water, fishing. But that’s another story. Because now we are in Capernaum. Have been for a few days at least. If you read it, you will see, the story says “they went to Capernaum, and WHEN the Sabbath came...” Anyway, it is where we are. In Capernaum. In the synagogue. On the Sabbath. And Jesus is teaching.

The whispers are all around. People in wonder. The authority with which he teaches. Yet it is not an appointed or elected authority, not a lording-over kind—not

like the scribes who rely on the authority of their role, their training, and knowledge. With Jesus it's a lived authority; an acquired honour come through relationship,<sup>1</sup> through trust and time; the journeying with in the struggle and chaos, the rubble and wreckage of life. So, it's not so much **what** Jesus is teaching; but his interpretation that is somehow so relevant. Because he knows. After all, Jesus wasn't just suddenly plunked here in the midst of this synagogue, in the midst of our faith and religious traditions. He has lived our reality. Walked these dusty streets, and Capernaum is getting a name for being the town and place of Jesus. The place where Jesus lives.

Well, anyway... right into the midst of our wonder, in this place where Jesus lives; suddenly, violently, like a whirlwind—chaos, destruction—a man literally blows in from nowhere. He is shouting obscenities, incoherent, convulsing, twitching, writhing—very literally swirling, whirling, stirring up the centuries of dust that have found their way into the cracks and crevices; creaking and groaning the wooden planks of the floor and maybe tradition too. Creaking and groaning like the planks of the deck of my boat that now seems worlds away. Because it is obvious—we are not in Galilee anymore. And immediately everyone around reacts. Like a twister of our own. Because we are afraid and you never know what people like that might do. Yes, I said, “Like that.” The named reality of how we feel in the moment. Unsafe. Gathering children close, veering out of the way, steering clear; will the authorities actually escort the man out the door before someone gets hurt? Seems they are not so authoritative now...

---

<sup>1</sup> Based on the thought of Osvaldo Vena, [www.workingpreacher.org](http://www.workingpreacher.org) Jan 2021

And now the whispers have changed. From wonder to fear. And we hear the word that grips every human heart. “Demons.” Another naming. We have named this man, judged his spirit “unclean;” as apart from God as you can get. And maybe you want to call us a little naïve. A little backwoods. Like we grew up in Kansas or Galilee for that matter. But at the end of your day too, still the word lingers. Along with it, the discomfort and fear of us all. For while in your culture you understand—or at least say you do—that you no longer attribute symptoms of shouting and convulsing with demon possession or an unclean spirit as we call it.<sup>2</sup> That even though you would no longer say physical or mental illness are caused by demonic evil forces and inseparably connected to the state of one’s soul and standing with God—none of us; first or twenty-first century—none of us can deny the fear and stigma that results in the isolation and exclusion of people who suffer the debilitating effects of disease. People we send swirling and whirling; banishing them to foreign places as far away from us as possible.

Because we don’t want to confront or be confronted with the fear of things we don’t understand. Things a little too close to home. The things we push down and hide away; not only in others, but most of all deep within ourselves. The anxiety of an uncertain future; the stress of everything we have known that has been whisked away; a loss of who we are in the face of a changing environment where we no longer know how to define ourselves. What confronts us now is not only a man but the things that bind every one of us; that try as we might, we cannot control. That try as we might

---

<sup>2</sup> Cynthia Briggs Kittredge [www.workingpreacher.org](http://www.workingpreacher.org) Jan 2018

cannot stay hidden for long. Things that cannot remain silent. For now it is a walking, talking, personified spirit of evil that speaks. Speaks to our resident fear, confronts Jesus with the question that is ours too, “What do you want with us Jesus? Have you come to destroy us? To destroy our way of life; to openly cause chaos and destruction to the ways we have accepted; the depth of all the things we hide and refuse to name about ourselves, even about our faith and traditions; the things that yet bind us and are so intricately swirled and whirled into our identity. Have you come to uproot and transplant us into a totally foreign and new terrain? What do you want with us Jesus?”

Do you find it as ironic as I do—that who we name “unclean,” “unworthy,” “unholy” that this unclean spirit is the first; in the presence of God and all of us gathered in faith; that a man with unclean spirit is the first to name Jesus. To name the reality of God among us. To acknowledge the power. Evil forces have the most to lose in the coming of Jesus and the Good News of God’s life. Still, it is uncertain, unknown, we have been plunked down into a foreign land. We don’t want to name what Jesus already sees within us. Our darkest times and places when we cannot hide—the forces of evil that grip and convulse us—fear that separates; divides rich from poor, that breeds hatred and violence based on differences of race, colour, creed and faith; fear that grows into greed and taking for ourselves at the exclusion of others. Fear that is grappling to survive the swirling wind. Fear that if these ways are uprooted from us; if these ways come to light; that we cannot trust God to do anything but destroy us; that we cannot trust God with our very lives. So hurry up! Let’s get back to Kansas, to what we know; before it’s too late.

But we can't go back. Only a short dusty road away from my nets and my boat, but so far away from the life of a fisherman; it has never been clearer that we are not in Galilee anymore. Because here, Jesus does not cast out the man, does not judge him unclean. Here Jesus sets one free. Free from what has bound him. Free from what has controlled him. Free from a life of exclusion and banishment. Free from the grip of evil and death that have named him unworthy and unclean. Free. Here evil no longer has a hold. Here Jesus sets us all free. Reality has been uprooted. Life is renamed.

It is where following leads. Where we are called. To the place of pain and struggle, of chaos and confusion. To the place where evil is named; called out; seen for what it is. For when evil is named it loses its power. Called to the place where fear is cast out and the bound are set free. To the place where the isolated are welcomed and valued. To the place where wonder is whispered and God speaks. To the place where hope rises in our greatest darkness. To the place where life is commanded. Where life is the only priority. Where the spoken and lived authority of Jesus walks our dusty roads. Where the spoken lived authority of Jesus journeys with us in the rubble and wreckage of life. Where the acquired honour of Christ comes in creaking and groaning wooden planks of a cross. And in a whirlwind our house is raised. In a whirlwind Jesus raises this house and our lives, and plunks us right into the middle of the world. Because it is where following leads. To the place where Jesus lives. And we are not in Kansas anymore. Thanks be to God!