

“Here be dragons”
Westminster Presbyterian Church
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Mark 1:21-28

By Rev. Patrick D. Heery

Who here has made a new year’s resolution? I don’t mean to be pessimistic, but according to research, there’s a good chance you already have or will soon fail to keep that resolution. Thanks a lot, Girl Scout cookies! Every year!

Blogger Kat Lee writes, “Some people call it February. I call it the month where all New Year’s Resolutions Go To Die.” Worse, social networking company Strava analyzed more than 800 million user activities to predict that in fact most people will not make it to February; no, they will have given up on their resolution by January 19. That right: we made it a whole 19 days before giving up. A study by the University of Scranton reports that just 8 percent of people complete their resolutions.

Why is it so hard to change? Why do we resist change, even when we know it’s good for us? We keep thinking the same negative thoughts, logging in the same bloated work hours, dating the same wrong people, eating the same unhealthy food, neglecting the same spiritual practices, creating the same waste, buying the same clutter, disregarding the same people. Why is it so difficult to break old habits, to let go of resentments, to overcome addictions and mindsets of hate and all the toxic stuff in our lives that’s stopping us from being happy, from being faithful and righteous? It’s like every day is Groundhog Day, and we are all Bill Murray.

Though—and again, not to be pessimistic—but if even Jesus couldn’t change some people, our prospects aren’t looking too bright. Right? Because if change was ever going to be easy, it should have been easy with the Son of God staring at you. When we get to our Scripture reading today, Jesus has just been baptized. The heavens have ripped open; the Holy Spirit has descended; God has proclaimed Jesus God’s Son, the Beloved. He has been in the wilderness and thwarted temptation: Not today, Satan! He has called his first disciples and begun preaching the good news. This should be easy, right? Wrong. Jesus’ ministry begins with resistance.

Jesus is teaching in the synagogue. But he doesn’t sound like the other preachers. He’s not just interpreting the past. He’s saying something new. “You have heard it said... but I say to you....” He’s calling for change. This frightens one of the people. A man with an unclean spirit. A demon, some would say. Or perhaps simply a woundedness, such that we all carry—a trauma, a guilt, an insecurity or broken relationship or backwards mindset—something in him that’s keeping him prisoner, traps him in toxic patterns, distances him from God and community, something that hurts him but also has come to define him.

The demon cries out, “What have you to do with us, Jesus? Have you come to destroy us?” Note that it’s not the man who speaks. No. It is the demon. It is the hurt in him that speaks. He has become but the puppet on the strings of his hurt. And this hurt doesn’t ask if Jesus has come to

free the man, to save him. No. It asks if he has come to destroy. The Greek here conveys devastation, a verb meaning to abolish, to ruin, to wipe off the face of the earth. That is how the hurt in him perceives change—as loss. It does not want to be destroyed, and if the man is honest, *he* does not want it to be destroyed, for he has grown accustomed to this hurt; it has become all he knows. What is a puppet without strings? Who is he without his hurt, his resentment, his hate, his unhealthy habits and patterns?

Who are we?

Maybe this is why we resist change, why even people faced with Jesus Christ himself resisted change. Because change isn't first a giving, but a taking. Change is an emptying. It is an atomic bomb. It threatens to take from us what we have known. Even awful things are still *our* things, and it can be terrifying to imagine life without them, because we do not know who we would be without them.

In Jonathan Franzen's novel *The Corrections*, there's a man named Chip, whose life has fallen apart. He has accrued tens of thousands of dollars of debt to his sister. The one thing that he's still holding onto, the one thing that ironically seems to give him purpose, is this debt—it's the idea that he can, and will, work hard enough, be smart enough, to pay it back. Chip's sister Denise tells him that she wants to forgive the debt. Chip refuses, again and again, anxiously, until Denise asks him, "Can you stand to be forgiven?" He responds, "No. Basically, no. I can't." In the words of the author, Chip is trembling, with "the feeling that his debt to Denise, far from being a burden, was his last defense... He'd lived with the affliction of this debt until it had assumed the character of a neuroblastoma so intricately implicated in his cerebral architecture that he doubted he could survive its removal."

Accepting his sister's forgiveness would mean accepting that he couldn't do it on his own, that he needed help, that he wasn't who he thought he was, who the world told him to be: a smart, confident, successful, independent guy. It would mean an explosion.

The beauty of our Scripture this morning is that Jesus gets it. He has just confronted his own demon, an image of power and adoration, a conqueror, everything the world has ever said that a messiah should be. When he resisted the temptation, he too experienced an explosion: If not that, what am I?

He finds his answer there in that synagogue. He is the one who recognizes our demons, the hurts that seek to control us—he sees them, knows them for what they are—and he tells us that we are more than that. He says to that demon, "Be silent and come out of him!" It's so subtle we might miss it: Jesus doesn't speak as if the demon and the man are the same. He insists that this man is not his sin, not his hurt. He is more.

The unclean spirit comes out of him. Mark describes it as a painful process, "convulsing and crying with a loud voice." He describes it as a kind of loss. But the story doesn't end there. Jesus empties him, so that he may enter. Suddenly, Jesus shines in him. This man becomes one in whom the love of God is visible. It's the final verse of our story today: "At once his fame began to spread."

That's the good news. We think we are our pain; we are our sin; we are our addictions, our abuse, our hate, all the ways we've been hurt or have hurt others. We think that defines us. But we think wrong. The Gospel is clear: this man is not his demon, and neither are we. It may control him for a time, but it does not define the essence of him. Nor does it dictate his future. To lose it is not to lose himself; it is to find himself.

That's what Christ offers us: to see ourselves, at last, not as the demon says, but as God says. Not perfect, but so, so very lovely... wanted... a unique and irreplaceable expression of God.

And once we have that, we can change. We don't need those demons anymore. We don't need hate. We don't need a bottle or a needle. We don't need the ways we were hurt or the ways we hurt others. We don't need greatness or ambition. We don't need anything. Because everything we need, we have. Everything we want, we are.

You know, old maps used to mark their edges and uncharted territories with monsters and the phrase "Here be dragons." Those dragons, or demons, represented everything keeping us from facing the unknown, from stretching and growing, from changing into something better, bigger.

Jesus invites us to set sail to the borders of our map. It will be dangerous territory, no doubt. Full of unknowns and dragons. But for the first time, we will face it, free and true. We will know that we are not our dragons. And freed of their dominion, we will at last see the world, and us in it, with God's eyes. We will see beauty, and glory, not because this life is perfect, but because it is loved. We will brave change, because we will learn to trust that in the absence of dragons and demons, we will not in fact fall off the edges, but will sail into undiscovered country. Into hope. Into the person we were always meant to be, and in fact always were—we just didn't know it.

Amen.