

Sermon for January 28, 2018 (Epiphany 4B): **“Imps and Authorities”**  
(Based on Mark 1:21-28)

Tucked in between the saints and the lilies, it sits. High up on a pillar in Lincoln Cathedral, above the area called the Angel Choir, the stone carved by some unknown hand, seven centuries ago, into a wooly torso, cow's ears, pointy teeth and hooves. Some say the wind blew it in. Some say the powers of Hell sent the imp and it managed to trip the bishop before a convenient angel turned it to stone. No one knows for sure, yet locals and tourists alike seek it out, peering up into the cathedral's vaulted space, scanning the architecture for it. They call it, simply, “The Lincoln Imp.”

I saw the imp myself on a raw December day, wandering the 12th-century cathedral with my mother while my father worked at a nearby Air Force base. My father's job had taken the family to England for 18 months, but my only chance was to join them for my winter college break. One month in England, land of at least a few of my faithful forebears. I'd never been there before, so I brought all the cultural baggage I could carry. How much Englishness could I fit into one month with my family in Lincolnshire? I wanted Robin Hood and Peter Rabbit, Sherlock Homes and Agatha Christie. I wanted Secret Gardens and Wuthering Heights. I wanted tea and scones on a bone china plate. I wanted to eat Yorkshire Pudding in the actual city of York.

We started out with the Lincoln cathedral. All the official guides all downplayed the Imp. They tried to steer tourists toward all the lovely angels and the elegant architecture and the tombs of long-ago saints. But I was drawn to that weird, jeering, disturbing creature tucked in above the angels. I couldn't get it out of my head—and I wasn't alone. All the other meanderers in that ancient cathedral ended up where I did, peering up into the shadows in the Angel Choir, on a ghoulish scavenger hunt.

If things had gone another way, the Imp might not have been there for us to find. A local group of Evangelical Christians had been campaigning for decades to have the figure removed. They considered it an affront to their faith, a nod to demonic forces in

what should have been a pure and sacred space. The bishop and the dean had held several conversations with the group over the years. By the time I wandered in to the cathedral, I think they'd settled into the reliable grey haze of English diplomacy, both sides well dug in but too polite to say (out loud) that their adversaries were fools, idiots, maybe even possessed.

Thanks to that stalemate, the imp was there for me to find, high atop one of the pillars, right below the towering array of lilies, right above the carving of St. Hugh's head. It was strange, all right—strangely familiar. It was like the irresistible edge of a broken tooth, the sharp uncomfortable place your tongue can't leave alone. It was like the rough skin of an old scar or the old ache of a once-broken bone: an imperfection that reminds you of mistakes you made and things you regret. The very wrongness of it becomes part of who you are.

The synagogue at Capernaum would never be mistaken for a cathedral. It was a small place, not fancy, just room enough for local Jews to gather for study and prayer. It was more like a country meeting-house. Often as not, there was no-one exactly in charge, no priestly figure to make every sabbath unfold with the same standards and decorum. There were scribes, of course—local scholars who loved to study the law and remind everyone how often they fell short, but when it came to spiritual growth, people relied on travelling teachers and preachers and were glad for what they could get. One sabbath, the traveller happened to be the son of a tradesman from Nazareth—a rough place—not a town known for producing rabbis at the top of their game.

*They went to Capernaum; and when the sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught. They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes. Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, and he cried out, "What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy*

*One of God." But Jesus rebuked him, saying, "Be silent, and come out of him!" And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him. --Mark 1:21-26*

The unclean spirit doesn't show up on the road to a distant land, or in the chaos of the marketplace. It shows up in the middle of worship, in a place people come to pray. It shows up where we think we have everything under control—in a school in Benton, Kentucky, at a town office in Jackman, Maine—and says, *what does Jesus have to do with me?* It shows up on a quiet residential street in Waterville, where a Haitian-American man leaves his house for work on a January morning, and is met in his driveway by ICE agents, apprehended and driven across state lines, and put in prison to await deportation, before he can say goodbye to his two children and his pregnant wife.

But we shouldn't be surprised. The unclean spirit doesn't come from someplace else. We can't bar the door to prevent it, because it's already here. Like that stone imp, carved into the cathedral, it's in our architecture. If you don't know where to look, it just sits there, unnoticed, but it is a part of every one of us. It is the voice that says, "Ignore the suffering. They probably deserve it." (And if you're the one suffering, the voice says, "it's your fault and you don't deserve help.") It's the mental itch that says, "I don't want to sit-stand-work-play-shop-sing-pray next to them, they are not like me." It's the part of me that says, "I am too tired to take on this cause, it's not my problem, not my fight. What have you got to do with me, Jesus?"

An epiphany can be a realization, sudden as a searchlight or slow as the dawn. And it feels to me like there's almost too much light, right now-- like somebody flicked on the floodlights in the synagogue at Capernaum, right as the unclean spirit started screaming, until I'm ready to scream too: what have you got to do with me, Jesus?

Jesus rebuked the spirit. He told it to hush, and he called it out. And do you know what that spirit did? It did not stop making noise. It did not stop causing a disturbance—if anything, it got worse. But because Jesus called it out, it came out—

where everyone could recognize it for what it was. There has always been power in the act of naming. Jesus called it out—he named the evil, the pain, the terror, the disease, the source of suffering. And the man who suffered under its influence was given relief, and after so many nightmares, his healing finally began.

*They were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, "What is this? A new teaching--with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him." At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee. --Mark 1:27-28*

We're so human. Even in this Gospel story, we could just say, "he got famous," and end it there. "He was famous, you know. Different from you and me." We could shove this story into a box and say, "we're not like that. It cannot happen here." This new teaching—and the source of its authority—has nothing to do with us.

But there are imps in our architecture. There is a built-in sickness that keeps us complicit in so much suffering—the suffering of others, and our own. It laughs at us from high places. Like the cow-eared, sheep-footed little imp, it borrows and shapes itself from everything near at hand. And the only way to deflate its power is to draw on the authority and teaching of Jesus: call it out for the evil it really is. Stop being a bystander. Learn how to become an upstander. Because Jesus did not come to manipulate or humiliate, to play on our fears and threaten and divide. Jesus came with a different authority: to bring new vision, new life, release to the captives. Jesus came to reach a hand into our darkest shadows, among all the strangeness and ugliness carved by known and unknown hands on the architecture of our souls. Jesus came to engage and rebuke the powers of destruction and unleash the healing power of the Holy Spirit among us, that we might live into wholeness, remember that we were created for compassion, and reclaim our birthright of blessing. What has Jesus got to do with us? And what shall we do, with Jesus?

*--Preached by Rev. Holly S. Morrison, pastor  
Phippsburg Congregational Church, Phippsburg, Maine*