

## **Deuteronomy 18:15-20**

<sup>15</sup>The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own people; you shall heed such a prophet. <sup>16</sup>This is what you requested of the LORD your God at Horeb on the day of the assembly when you said: “If I hear the voice of the LORD my God any more, or ever again see this great fire, I will die.” <sup>17</sup>Then the LORD replied to me: “They are right in what they have said. <sup>18</sup>I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their own people; I will put my words in the mouth of the prophet, who shall speak to them everything that I command. <sup>19</sup>Anyone who does not heed the words that the prophet shall speak in my name, I myself will hold accountable. <sup>20</sup>But any prophet who speaks in the name of other gods, or who presumes to speak in my name a word that I have not commanded the prophet to speak—that prophet shall die.”

## **Mark 1:21-28**

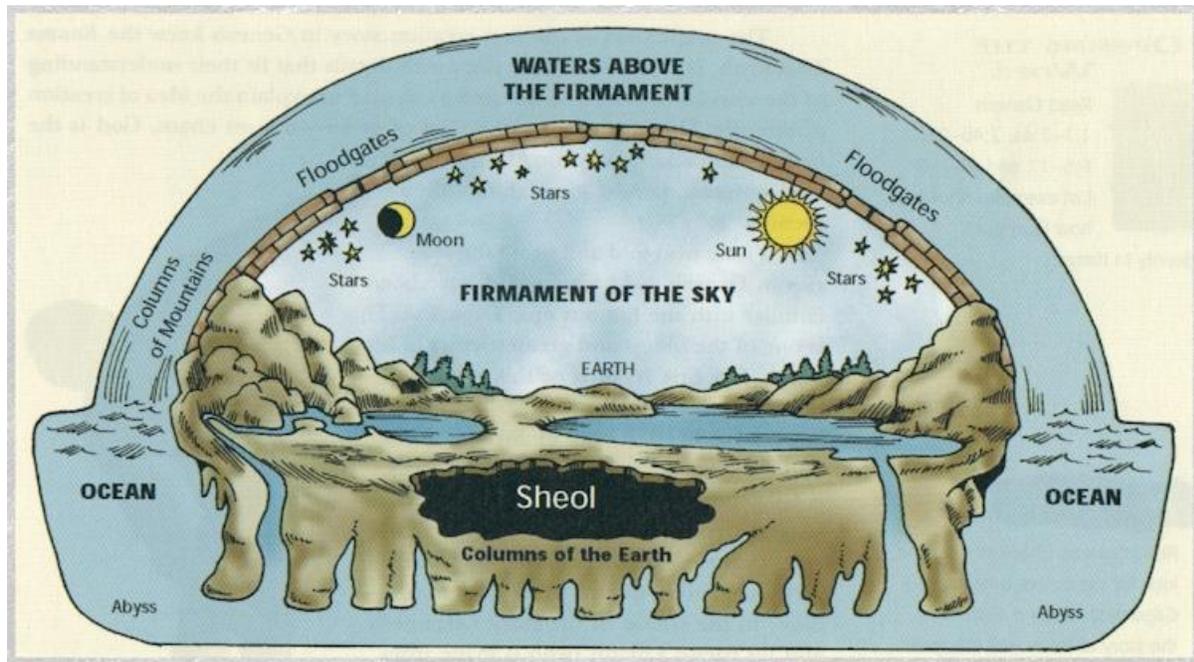
<sup>21</sup>They went to Capernaum; and when the Sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught. <sup>22</sup>They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes. <sup>23</sup>Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, <sup>24</sup>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.” <sup>25</sup>But Jesus rebuked him, saying, “Be silent, and come out of him!” <sup>26</sup>And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him. <sup>27</sup>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.” <sup>28</sup>At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.

## **There Are No Limits to What God Can Do**



I think everyone here has seen this picture, or one like it. I wonder if you can remember the first time you saw it and experience what you may have experienced then. The first

pictures of the earth from space were taken when I as a young child, so seeing something like this would have coincided with learning that this was the world that I lived in, and I believe I must have felt some great sense of awe in seeing this, and realizing that the place I occupy on this planet, my house, my town, are tiny in relation to the entire world. I imagine what it must have been like when people first recognized that the earth was round, or to be more precise, *spherical*. To think that it was only 500 years ago that scientists thought that ships sailing too far from land would fall off the earth.



To the people who wrote the Old Testament, the world was imagined as something like the picture displayed here. The oceans seemed endless and may have extended into the cosmos. Every once in a while the floodgates would open for rain or snow to pour through. Below the earth was Sheol, often translated as 'hell,' and which everyone dreaded. The ocean was equally dreaded because it could consume you and carry you into the dreaded abyss.

When we read the Bible we need to take into account the perspective of the person writing it and the original audience for whom it was intended. Of course that doesn't mean that the Bible is no longer valid for us; some passages don't lose any of their original meaning despite the fact that they were written thousands of years ago ("For God so loved the world that he gave his only son..."), but if we are truly seeking to hear God's voice speak to us in some scripture and understand what God is saying to us today, we need to do a little translation. Otherwise we may feel so detached from the world as it's described in scripture, or we may feel that scripture is so incomprehensible that we no longer consider it relevant to our own world. The world has not changed that much in the last 3000 years, but our language and our understanding of the world has changed, and we need to appreciate how the people in Jesus' day understood the world.

4. So when we read today's Gospel lesson about a man in a synagogue with an "unclean spirit" possessing him, we may think of *The Exorcist* or some such story. But today we know there is controversy over this notion of demonic possession; some psychologists dismiss it as a form of epilepsy, as someone going through psychogenic seizures. If you believe that demonic possession still occurs today, that's okay, but if you are skeptical, a psychological explanation could help you understand what may have been going on in that synagogue two thousand years ago, and such an explanation doesn't discredit scripture but rather *translates* scripture to our modern understanding. Who knows how people may understand things two thousand years into the future, but there will be plenty of people studying scripture in order to translate it into the current context.

5. One historic fact that we must accept is that many mental illnesses were at one time attributed to spiritual forces. Another fact is that societies have always had a difficult time dealing with those who were mentally ill, or possessed by unclean spirits. Just the fact that the Jewish community in Jesus' time attributed a condition to an *unclean* spirit meant that the community would have avoided such people because they were unclean; purity was a major concern. I dare say that we have the same concerns today; we often shy away from people with mental illnesses, and I would guess that if you came across someone possessed by an unclean spirit you might shy away from that person as well. We feel threatened, in danger, not so much that we're going to catch some mental virus but that we cannot predict the behavior of a person who we can't understand.

6. But another reason we shy away from the mentally ill person is that we see too much of ourselves in that person. None of us are perfectly sane. The great psychologist Carl Jung is reported to have said, "Show me a sane person, and I'll cure him for you."<sup>i</sup> The fact is that mental illness is not like a peanut allergy where you either have it or you don't. And there are multiple scales for measuring mental health, so that you may be classified "normal" on one scale but abnormal on another. If we see too much of ourselves in the person who is classified mentally ill we may wonder about ourselves, and that can make us uncomfortable. We don't like to acknowledge any psychological troubles in our own minds because there is such a stigma attached to mental illness. None of us are totally "normal," but we all want to think that we've made the cut in regards to sanity.



I think that it's important to keep our own relative degree of insanity in mind. Paul says that all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; there may not be any correlation between sin and sanity but I believe that all fall short of perfect mental health, and therefore we should be a bit humble when it comes to criticizing the more severely mentally ill.

7. Furthermore, as disciples of Jesus Christ, we are called to minister to all people, including those who are classified as mentally ill or demonically possessed. Today's Gospel reading gives us a good model for working with the mentally and spiritually ill. Jesus is in the synagogue in Capernaum, teaching as one with authority, when a man with an unclean spirit enters. The spirit within the man cries out, "What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us?" Well the answer to that is "yes." Jesus has come to destroy evil of all forms. The kingdom of God is about God's rule, and God's rule is all about love, and nothing evil exists there. But notice that Jesus distinguishes the spirit from the man. Jesus casts out the spirit, but not the man. In the fifth chapter of Mark we find Jesus crossing a lake to the land of the Gerasenes for no apparent reason but to treat a man who lives among the tombs, who has been chained there, and who is tormented by "unclean spirits." What amazes me is that Jesus crosses the lake, heals this man, and heads back across the lake; he went far out of his way to minister to a single tormented person, a person that everyone else avoided like the plague. A person who others had put in chains to protect themselves, and I believe that Jesus would cross the ocean to minister to anyone of us who was suffering from some mental or spiritual torment.

And we, the church, are called to the same task. Gloria Shaw likes to tease me about leaving the front door of the church open “to let all the riff raff come in.” Of course we aint so righteous and pure ourselves, are we? The church is and always has opened her doors to the riff raff as we continue the ministry that Jesus started. And we offer something that mental health professionals would admit is an effective treatment for illnesses of all kinds; we offer acceptance and love and concern – one’s prognosis is always better when one dwells in a safe, nurturing environment.

8. We offer something else that the mental health community is not so good at offering; we offer hope. You see, the consensus among mental health professionals is that mental illness is not curable; it may be treated but it doesn’t go away. Well I don’t believe in any magic chants or incantations that will cure someone immediately, but I do believe that when someone is accepted as part of the community and embraced with the love of God that such a person will find some joy and some peace, and some comfort in the church. I further believe that with God all things are possible; embrace anyone in love, and that person has the potential to heal. This is our faith, and it’s a faith that we can assert with authority. We know that God has authority over all creation. Health professionals all say that treatments have limits, but that’s exactly where faith kicks in, because we believe that God has no limits. Our motto is “faith beyond faith and hope beyond hope.” With God, anything is possible.

9. I cannot make promises to those who are mentally ill or spiritually ill, that they will be healed here in church, but I can promise, and you can promise, that we, as a disciple of Jesus Christ, will do all that we can to treat the illness with the strength and knowledge that we have. And that’s what the church needs to do. We must promise to be faithful to our Lord Jesus Christ and lovingly treat all those who come to us in need with all the resources we can muster. We may not be therapists or licensed counselors, but we can administer love, and we can pray, and we can maintain our hope, and instill hope in those who suffer from their illnesses.

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<sup>i</sup> <http://quoteinvestigator.com/2012/07/08/sane-cure/>