

- I know a Methodist preacher, who on his first Sunday in a church in a small southern town, he moved through the service and he had been told the custom of this church was to have an altar call at the conclusion of the service. So, he ended his sermon and he said, "Now, if there are any who would like "to unite with this church by profession "of faith, if any would like to kneel "at the altar rail for prayer, "please feel free to come forward "during the singing of the last hymn." They began the last hymn. With that, a young man, toward the rear of the congregation, shrieked out and ran down the center aisle and he leapt over the altar rail and threw his whole body on the altar. And he began screaming and beating upon the altar, and kicking and the young minister stood there, just horrified. And with that, two of the older ushers got up and loped over and helped the young man off the altar, helped him out a side door. This had evidently happened before. But it so unnerved the pastor he could barely make it through the rest of the service. I don't think he ever recovered from that, it was... He wasn't helped when some of his fellow Methodist ministers, hearing about it, said things like, "Well, when you give an altar call, "you really give an altar call, don't ya?" But of course, mental illness and emotional confusion, it's no laughing matter. Some of you know firsthand the hell of the tormented mind, in yourself or in someone you love. Where does one take such torment? Perhaps that screaming, troubled young man had taken his misery to the right place in taking it to church. Today's Gospel lesson is Jesus' very first sermon at the synagogue in Capernaum, from Mark 1: And they went to Capernaum; and immediately on the sabbath he entered into the synagogue, and he taught. And they were amazed at his teaching, because he taught as one who had authority, and not as the scribes. And immediately there was in that 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, come out of him!" And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying out with a loud voice, came out of him. And they were all amazed, so that they questioned among themselves, saying, "What is this? "A new teaching? "With authority he commands even the unclean spirits, "and they obey him." This is the Word of the Lord. Jesus, the newest preacher in town, has just finished his first sermon at Capernaum. And as the hymn is being sung, this young man cries out in the middle of church, began shouting these vague threats at the preacher. "I know who you are," he says. Something howling deep within the man, "You're the holy one of God." And this happens in the synagogue on the holy sabbath. "Shut up," says Jesus, "Come out of him." Things were getting odd that day in Capernaum. The man fell on the floor, his arms beating wildly, his legs thrown out, people stepped back, gave him a wide circle, froths of foam, strange cries coming from his mouth. And then, the man grew strangely calm. A tranquil look came over his face. He lay very still. Slowly, he picked himself up. His eyes were clear and his voice calm and composed. "What is this," people asked. And it occurred in church, of all places. I've had the privilege of visiting at the synagogue of Capernaum, the archeological site. And they can show you the pulpit from which Jesus must have preached. When I was there, I fantasized in my mind, wondering, just where was it in the synagogue that this episode occurred right in the middle of the sabbath congregation. Such events are all the more remarkable in church because church is one of the most planned and ordered, and orderly of human gatherings. It's one of the most quiet and controlled times of the week, church. We gather, we sit quietly, fixed in rows of pews, everything measured and moderate. I can still

remember, as a child, the pain, I guess it was the pain of having to sit quietly and still in church. Then, there're those rare occasions when there is some intrusion into our ordered solemnity. Say, someone slumps forward in the pew with a health crisis. Somebody in a shabby dress stumbles in off the street. Or a sleeping child wakes and begins to scream. And we're shaken by that intrusion, in church of all places. It's an interruption into what church is supposed to be. I've been known to tell my students at the divinity school, "You need to picture yourself as a pastor, "you're leading worship on Sunday morning, "and then, there's some unfortunate intrusion. "Someone has a health crisis, "somebody speaks out. "You need to picture in your mind "how you'll handle that, "as a pastor. "Will you call for an ambulance? "Would you look to the ushers "to help you out? "How would you handle this?" Because despite our best efforts as ministers and musicians, well, glitches, disturbances, interruptions, occur in church, of all places. It happened to Jesus. Awhile back, a student pastor, seminarian, was telling me that it's in his little church in eastern North Carolina, and as their custom was, he went to the service, he asked, "Are there any prayer requests?" And usually this was a ritual time, people stood up and gave thanks, a grandmother was visiting from Idaho, or someone said, "George got "through his gall bladder surgery okay "and we want to thank God for that." "The dog had puppies," whatever. But he said, on this Sunday, the first person to stand up said, "I don't know if any of you've heard or not, but "John left us last week "and I don't know what "the girls and I are going to do to survive." And that little church got real quiet. Because that was just a little more prayer than they wanted. Church can be so ordered and so graceful and beautiful, serene and still. Church so ordered is, it's the world as we would like it to be. Not just on Sunday mornings, but always. But of course, that's not the world. We got big, thick, oak doors on this place. But sometimes, things burst in those doors and church gets interrupted. This world, for all its beauty and grace, is also the world of the brokenhearted. This weekend, the musical, *Fantastics*, ha been playing on campus. And toward the end of the musical, this once naive young man and woman join in a song, only the heart that's been hurt is whole. Well, if that's true, then there's a lot of healthy hearts in the world. Because there's a lot of brokenness out there. Things just don't go well for people. That troubled man, screaming at Jesus that day, so full of demonic turmoil and possessed by this darkness, let him be a metaphor, a symbol, of all the chaotic confusion that sometimes, despite our best efforts on Sunday morning, buckles up, surges forth, breaks, intrudes, even in church, of all places. And I just don't know how well my nice middle class, middle-of-the-road church does with such darkness. We do better in the daylight, 11 o'clock, Sunday morning. A couple of weeks ago, I was preaching up at Harvard Memorial Church and at the end of the service everybody filed out, a young man lingered. He said to me, he thanked me for the sermon, and he said, "I used to come to this church, "but I haven't been here in about a year." He said, "I've been going to this little church "out on the edge of town." And I said, "Why don't you attend here anymore?" And he said, "Oh, the music's beautiful, "and the preacher's always great, but, "but," he said, "about a year ago, "I lost my job. "I started drinking too much. "My girlfriend left me "and my life just fell apart. "And right about then, "kind of the way they do church here, "it just, "it wasn't enough." "And I go out to this little church "where the music is just a little more engaging, "and the preacher, every now and then, "will get in your face, "and, "and I thought, yeah, I just don't know "that my kind of church does that well "when it gets dark. "And there's a lot of dark out there, "in here." I recall a haunting story of a young boy's awareness of that darkness ahead. It's in Par Lagerkvist's story, *My father and I*. Par Lagerkvist tells about when he was a little boy, he and his father walked out one Sunday afternoon and suddenly the clouds came over and it was an early dark. It had gotten so dark they had no way to find their way back to their little village, except by following the train tracks back. And he said, "I

walked beside my father. "I held tightly onto his hand "and I said, father, I'm afraid. "And my father looked down at me and said, "there's nothing to be afraid of. "I'm here and don't you know God is here?" But Par Lagerkvist said, "It didn't help. "I still felt this odd sense of fear." And there, in the darkness, right about that time, from out of nowhere, he says, "As we were rounding the bend, "suddenly there was a mighty roar behind us. "We were awakened out of our thoughts, alarmed. "Father pulled me down the embankment, "down into an abyss, "held me there. "A train tore past, "a black train, "all the lights in the carriages were out. "It was going at frantic speed. "What sort of train was it? "There wasn't one due now. "We gazed at it in terror. "The fire blazed in the huge engines, "sparks whirled in the night. "It was terrible. "The driver stood there in the light of the fire, "pale, motionless, his features as though stone. "Father didn't recognize him. "The driver just stared straight ahead, "as though intent only on rushing into the darkness, "far into the darkness that had no end. "And then, it was gone. "We climbed back up in the embankment. "We walked in silence. "My whole body was shaking. "It was for me, "for my sake. "I knew what it meant. "It was the anguish that was to come. "It was the unknown. "It was all that Father could never protect me from. "That was how this world, this life, "would be for me. "It wouldn't be like Father's, "where everything was secure and certain. "It just hurdled past, "blazing "into the darkness ahead." Some of you are young, bright future, but you're smart enough to know there is this darkness ahead. Oh, the darkness ahead on this crisp, Sunday, this fourth Sunday after Epiphany, the season of light. What of the darkness that intrudes into life? The confusion bubbles up, and cracks through the crust of sanity. What the answer? What does Jesus do with that darkness? Did you not hear today's Gospel? Jesus rebuked, "Be silent, "come out of him." The unclean spirit, convulsing and crying out with a loud voice, came out and they all were amazed and they questioned, "What is this? "With authority, he commands even the unclean spirits. "What is this?" It's Jesus, intruding. Not only that day at Capernaum, not only that wild, tormented man intruded, but also Jesus intruded. With a word of authority over the darkness, we find difficult even to name. When my sister's son died, on his 16th birthday, she was thrown into terrible grief, world shaken. A couple of months after her son's death, she was surprised in the middle of the afternoon, a doorbell rang and standing there was this Episcopal priest. He lived a couple of blocks away. She did not know him that well, he was not her pastor. This Episcopal priest standing there on the doorstep, he said, "Well, how are ya doing?" And she said, "Well, I think I'm doing fine. "I think I'm coping just fine." And he said, "You're lying. "Go in there, put on a pot of coffee. "We got to do business." And she said, "With that, I just melted into his arms "in this flood of grief. "For two hours he stayed there. "We talked. "He allowed himself to be exposed to that much pain." Looking back, she said, "I'll always be grateful for that pushy priest." Jesus is pushy. He enters the hurt that we dare not know how to speak its name, the darkness ahead, he rebukes it, commands it to depart, he stills the troubled spirit of those in torment. He is the holy one of God intruding among us, enters the pain, confronts the evil, takes charge, heals the broken heart. Amen.