

Sermon for January 31, 2021—“Possessed”

Fourth Sunday after Epiphany, Year B—Text: Mark 1:21-28

The Gospel of Mark has no birth story. A scant four verses in, it begins with Jesus being blessed and baptized by John, hearing a voice saying, “You are my beloved Child, with you I am well pleased!”

Immediately, the Spirit drove Jesus into a 40-day temptation in the wilderness; then a trip to the Sea of Galilee where he begins his public ministry by recruiting his first disciples. The next thing we’re told is that those four disciples—Simon, Andrew, James and John—followed him into the synagogue in Capernaum on the Sabbath. As an itinerant rabbi, Jesus is invited to teach. Everyone says, “He’s teaching with such power and authority.”

Jesus draws immediate fire from the demons. A man with an unclean spirit disrupts worship. He cries out, whether on his own behalf or as the spokesperson for the community: “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.”

Author Lawrence Moore writes: “This is the opening, public round between Jesus and the Strong Man. The demons are aware of an immediate threat to the kingdom of the Strong Man. It is not Jesus who is actively seeking a confrontation, rather, the world as it is cannot remain the same if his message is true.” The “Strong Man” being referred to here is—as you may have guessed—Satan. He’s the subject of a parable of Jesus that appears in all three synoptic gospels—Matthew, Mark and Luke.

Here in our reading, there ensues a contest not quite like the contest being played out next week, when the Kansas City Chiefs and the Tampa Bay Buccaneers meet in the Super Bowl. This confrontation is first of many between Jesus and the powers of evil and the status quo. There are other battles raging out there far more important than who wins the Super Bowl.

In the first twenty-one verses of his Gospel, Mark sets up an interesting dichotomy. Jesus is blessed and beloved, contrasted with a man possessed by an “unclean” spirit—a spirit that’s **not** telling him that he’s beloved by God or pleasing to God in any way. To be possessed by an unclean spirit or demon was considered to be “impure,” contrary to the sacred—outside the sanctity of God. Still—and unsurprisingly to us—Jesus intercedes. He says simply: “Be silent, and come out of him!” The hymn *Silence! Frenzied, Unclean Spirit* by Thomas Troeger elaborates.

“Silence! Frenzied, unclean spirit cried God’s healing, holy One.
Cease your ranting! Flesh can’t bear it. Flee as night before the sun.
At Christ’s voice the demon trembled from its victim madly rushed,
While the crowd that was assembled, stood in wonder, stunned and hushed.”

Nowadays, some question the existence of demons and we might use other words for them, but it doesn’t mean that demons no longer live among us. Pastor Nadia Bolz-Weber explains demons by saying,

“Maybe demons are anything other than God trying to tell us who we are. Before we do anything wrong or right, God has named and claimed us as God’s own. But other things try to tell us who we are and to whom we belong. They all have a go at telling us who we are or should be. But only God can do that. Everything else is temptation.”

“Maybe demons are defined as anything other than God trying to tell us who we are.” I like that, and it’s because we are so much more than the demons that haunt us. We don’t have to be defined by them, not when God has named us and claimed us as his own.

While I was in seminary at Gettysburg, I remember hearing about how Martin Luther shuttered himself away in Wartburg Castle to translate the Greek Bible into German. During this time, he struggled with doubt and discouragement from what he named the devil. The line from *A Mighty Fortress Is Our God* is quite telling:

“And though this world with devils filled should threaten to undo us...
We will not fear—for God hath willed His truth to triumph through us.
The prince of darkness grim, we tremble not for him,
His rage we can endure, for lo, his doom is sure. One little word shall fell him.”

Luther felt that he was part of a world filled with demons. I read a biography about him in seminary and it was aptly titled *Luther: Man Between God and the Devil*. An absolutely fascinating book. Much like John Calvin, Luther was plagued by poor health. Scholars believe he suffered from kidney stones, vertigo, heart problems, arthritis, cataracts and a digestive disorder.

Besides the pain from his health conditions, Luther was also plagued by demons of another sort, the demons of self-doubt, depression and the stress from constant battles when he was doing his best to reform the Church and change the way things had always been done. What did he do to contend with his demons? For one thing—strangely enough—he was known to throw inkpots around to scare away his demons. He would also go around the castle grounds saying, “I am baptized! I am baptized!”

He’s believed to have placed a large plaque in his room that said, “Remember your baptism.” The sign was basically saying, I am named and claimed by God—not by my demons. We might want to consider reminding ourselves some time.

Apparently—however—demons don’t care if you believe in them or not. Renowned preacher/professor Fred Craddock once said, “Not believing in demons, has hardly eradicated evil in our world.” Main stream Christianity rarely deals with the supernatural or demonic. We have—for the most part—properly exorcized the devil and Satan from our theology of God and have doubts about angels and demons. C. S. Lewis, in his book *The Screwtape Letters* seemed to hit the nail on the head when he wrote:

“There are two equal and opposite errors into which our race can fall about the devils. One is to disbelieve in their existence. The other is to believe .and to feel an excessive and unhealthy interest in them. They themselves are equally pleased by both errors and hail a materialist or a magician with the same delight.”

So, we cast disparaging glances on televangelist healers or—at the very least—are skeptical about them—and rightly so. But how can we help the church reclaim its healing ministry in this scientific age, even as we understand that there are those who are “possessed” by “powers” beyond ourselves. Things like addiction, mental illness and compulsive behaviors.

Now—to be clear—I’m not in any way, shape or form trying to suggest that any of those things, or any other illnesses for that matter, are brought on by demonic possession or that they are one and the same thing. I like to think I know better and I’m willing to admit that when it comes to biblical texts that deal with demonic possession and exorcisms, I’m sometimes at a complete loss as to what’s going on. I try to stay somewhere in the middle of the two extremes that C. S. Lewis talks about.

What I’m trying to do is make an analogy of sorts, in talking about the very **real** things that plague and possess humanity. Things that seem to grab ahold of us and refuse to let us go. I mean, think about it. Who hasn’t met or known someone who’s going through a tough transition and find it difficult to come back to themselves? I’d say most of you have, because just a few years ago a former member of our staff battled addiction issues. And if he’s listening right now I want him to know that he’s not been forgotten; that he’s been forgiven and is prayed for on a regular basis.

Who else might we know? There are those trying to get sober, leaving behind drugs or alcohol; but the addiction isn’t so easily dismissed. There are those facing debilitating depression who find it hard to get out of bed in the morning. There are those who are battling other mental health issues, or things like cancer, heart disease, Parkinson’s disease, Alzheimer’s, dementia, divorce, job issues, relational issues—you name it.

We live in a world of suffering and pain that begs for transformation. There are contests playing out all around us by whatever name you call them. Contests between demons of hunger and poverty, racism and sexism, violence and oppression, refugees and immigrants fleeing for their lives, the environment and climate change. Even institutions can be possessed, rooting for death rather than life. We may not call it demonic and should never refer to anyone as “demonic,” but that doesn’t make Bible stories about exorcisms irrelevant. Not believing in demons doesn’t mean there’s magically no evil or suffering in our lives or in our world.

However we understand the concept, stories about demons and Jesus exorcising them are still quite relevant. Why? Well, it’s because they’re stories about healing and transformation. Author Alexander Solzhenitsyn said that:

“...the line separating good and evil passes not through states, nor between classes, nor between political parties either; but right through every human heart and through all human hearts.” Jesus comes to remove the unclean spirits from all of us that goes down the middle of our hearts.”

The passage from Mark’s gospel suggests that even demons have a Godward bent. The unclean spirit knows precisely who Jesus is and greets him with apprehension. Is the spirit

afraid of being destroyed or is it hopeful of healing? Like the unclean spirit, we may want the holy to leave us alone to live our lives, too. We may turn away from God's best vision for our lives to follow on destructive paths.

Yet there's always hope that we may experience God's vision of wholeness for us and others. Jesus opposes the forces of evil which would rob the children of God of all that God hopes and intends for them.

Mark's gospel shows us a boundary-breaking, demon-fighting figure in the person of Jesus to save us and to remind us of who and whose we **truly** are. Jesus doesn't leave us to deal with our demons alone, however we define them. Not when we are beloved and belong body and soul to God; bought—as Paul reminds us—at a price, a very high price—by Jesus himself on behalf of the Father. So, if we're possessed by anyone—it's God!

But there's more—isn't there always? And here—brothers and sisters—is the thing...

That same Jesus invites us and gives us power to challenge, heal and release others from their demons. Name the demons you know, personal or communal. Name them, rebuke them and help bring about the beloved community that God has imagined for us. Healing remains an important, if not forgotten aspect, of the church's ministry and our quest for wholeness. We are called—individually and as churches—to be God's companions, partners in healing the world. One moment. One encounter. One person at a time.

Thanks be to God. Amen and amen.