

Sunday January 28th, 2024

Epiphany 4

Mark 1:21-28

“Unclean Spirit”

Douglas Mantz (*Let There be Laughter*) tells the story about a time when a church service was in progress and a huge snowstorm blew in. A man dressed up as devil was going to a costume party down the road past the church, but his car got stuck in the snow. He remembered seeing the lights of the church near the road and walked back for help. It just so happened that when he clumped in the door, the minister was just launching into the climax of a hell-fire-and-devil sermon.

At the first glimpse of the costumed devil, everyone ran shrieking out of the church and dived into the snowbanks! Everyone that is, except one little old lady, who sat there and chanted: “You can’t hurt me, Mr. Devil! You can’t hurt me, Mr. Devil!” “No, of course, I can’t, Madam!” said the costumed devil. “No sir! You can’t hurt me!” the old lady said to him. “I may have been in this church these sixty years, but you must know I’ve always taken your side in everything!”

Passages, like our gospel lesson today, force all of us to ask serious questions about evil, demons, and the devil. Most critical in our questioning is whether we believe demons exist, and what we really think about the existence of evil. The people of Jesus’ day had no trouble believing demons played a role in how people’s lives turned out. When someone in the village began to behave oddly, especially destructively to others, or to themselves, they would immediately think the person was possessed.

Modern scholars and medical professionals look at passages like this one before us today and try to explain away demonic influence by concluding the person had a mental illness, like: a split personality, paranoia, or schizophrenia. In other cases where the possessed person is given to physical manifestations, rather than verbal ones (see Mark 9), modern scholars conclude the person had epilepsy, or some other brain disorder. They argue that a lack of scientific knowledge led people to a blanket diagnosis of demonic possession.

Mark, however, has no problem seeing the reality that as the Apostle Paul states, “For we are not fighting against people made of flesh and blood, but against the evil rulers and authorities of the unseen world, against those mighty powers of darkness who rule this world, and against wicked spirits in the heavenly realms.” (Ephesians 6:12) But how do you feel about his subject. Is it superstitious nonsense? Is it unenlightened thinking?

According to Dr. Scott Peck in his book *People of the Lie*, there is considerable psychological evidence for satanic or demonic influence in the lives of people. Ancient mythology regarding Satan was that in the beginning, Satan was God’s second in command, chief among the angels, the beautiful and beloved Lucifer. It is surprising to learn that in the beginning, the service Satan performed for God, was to enhance the spiritual growth of human beings through testing and temptation.

This is like how we might test our children to enhance their growth. Satan originally was primarily a teacher of human beings.

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It may also surprise you to learn that his name *Lucifer*, literally means, “The Light Bearer”.

As time went on, the story goes; Satan became so enamored with his adversarial function, that he began to employ it more and more for its own delight, rather than on God’s behalf. This is what we see happening in the book of Job. To further unpack this, the word “Devil” or “diabolical” comes from the same Greek word meaning “to oppose”. What is very interesting, is that in the book of Numbers, the Greek word used to describe God as he tried to stop the prophet Balaam was that he was a “Satan” or “opposer”.

So, whatever we may think, there is ample evidence to support that the work of Lucifer is to oppose; to oppose the work of God in Christ in building his kingdom. Lucifer, or the devil, was originally created by God to uplift humankind, and now he exists to spiritually destroy humankind. In the battle for our souls, Satan therefore perceives Christ as his personal enemy, and he will attempt to take whatever means possible to oppose Christ’s work.

Therefore, what we find in the scriptures, amounts to Jesus engaging in a war that has been going on for centuries. Mark pictures Jesus being forthright, blunt, and even hostile with those beings he encounters who are classified as evil spirits. When Jesus meets a demon possessed person, he doesn’t say, “Gee, let’s talk about it.” No, Jesus goes to war, and gets right to the heart of the matter, and calls the demon or demons, depending on which situation we are discussing, to come out of him or her.

Perhaps it might also help if we understand the difference between illness and possession. In the gospels, Jesus is recorded as having met and healed both sick people, whether those who are diseased, or suffered a deformity, and those who are demon possessed. In the conditions of both physical sickness, and spiritual sickness, it is implied that the image of God is distorted. The Gospels are quite clear that the function of a demon possession is to: distort, or destroy, the image of God in a person.

So, we can see the Apostle Paul’s point, when he argued that the thorn in the flesh was a torment of Satan. If we read Jesus’ encounters with possessed people, we read about how they are driven to self-mutilation, harming of others, and even living among tombs. They are described as: having superhuman strength, thrashing their limbs, foaming at the mouth, shouting obscenities, being irrational, and being uncontrollable. We even read of one man so possessed, that chains could not even hold him. (Mark 5)

Wherever a demon possessed person goes, there is no peace. They disrupt religious services, as we read today, and they terrify everyone. It is interesting that when Jesus encounters someone possessed in Mark’s gospel, the language used is that of combat or judgment. (Judges 11:12) To the demons involved, average people seem to be of no significance, only more fodder for their terrifying ways, but Jesus is another matter.

William Lane points out some very interesting things about the difference between Jesus’ healing sickness, and Jesus exorcising a demon.

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First off, Lane points out that it is amazing that as the average person struggled to understand just who Jesus was, and what he represented, the demons had no difficulty at all recognizing him as the Son of God. They knew their enemy, and they knew the danger they were in of losing their foothold in the possessed person's life.

Jesus was aware, as were the demons he encountered, that the true battle ground was in the souls of people. The opposition against Jesus in these tormented souls was formidable. The superior knowledge of the demons is evidenced in how they addressed Jesus. When Jesus encountered someone with a physical ailment, the ill person might refer to Jesus as: *Lord, Teacher, Son of David, or Master*. The demons, however, use the title *Son of God*.

They knew that Jesus was there to dispose of them, and to end their influence over people. I need to be clear here, in stating that this spiritual warfare Jesus is undertaking, is the main work of the Kingdom of God. Even the church itself is called to move forward into areas where darkness and demons reside. Jesus said to Peter after his confession of Jesus as the Messiah, "Now I say to you that you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church, and all the powers of hell will not conquer it."

The Greek words here, literally mean that the church will prevail, or assault the very resistance of Hell itself to the oncoming Kingdom of God, and the church will not be stopped. The image is captured well by Tolkien, when the good armies stand before the immovable gates of Mordor, but ultimately, they prevail over the forces of evil. Jesus came therefore, to strip Satan of his power, and the demons don't like it.

Now a curious thing occurs in our passage today that you might be wondering about. The demon states, "Why are you bothering us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are-the Holy One sent from God!" Then Jesus tells the evil spirit to be silent, and commands it to leave the tormented man. You might be wondering why Jesus tells the spirit to be silent.

In other places in the Gospel, Jesus tells people not to talk about his true nature to others, without much success I might add; but this time is different. The demon is not making a confessional statement about the true nature of Jesus, but rather is seeking control of Jesus.

In Jesus' day, and throughout much of human history, there has been the commonly held concept, that if you want to gain control over someone, you must use that person's true name. By using the person's true name, you can gain mastery over them. This idea of a hidden true name is in a great deal of our folklore and storytelling. Just think about *Rumpelstiltskin* or the *Eragon* series of books. Knowing this, Jesus will have none of it, and he silences the spirit.

It seems like an understatement, but the crowds who witnessed this were amazed. Amazed at Jesus' authority, authority even over evil spirits. And as expected, news of what happened spread all over the land.

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So, I come back to my original question; what do you make of all this? I think if nothing else, we need to be fully aware that we are at war, a war with powers and principalities. If you have any doubts, just pick up your newspaper and read through it, paying attention to those moments when you catch yourself saying, “How could he or she do such a thing?”

Of recent note is that horrific story in Pakistan where Taliban gunmen burst into a school killing dozens of children. Or how Boko Haram can attack a village in Nigeria and kidnap dozens of girls. The world is full of nasty, evil stuff.

A part of the gospel story that is very disturbing to me, is that this demon possessed man was right in the synagogue. He was not a stranger to these people. They knew his name, his family, and he was around to frighten everyone. We don't know how long he was possessed, but even one day is far too long. The people avoided him, when in fact they should have banded together, and confronted the darkness in him.

Awlwyn Balnave of Calgary tells a story about a friend of his that served as a police officer in a remote northern native settlement. One day a rabid wolf wandered into the settlement. The police officer eventually shot it, but not before it attacked a young man and his grandmother in their home, making kindling out of a chair the young man used to protect himself from the wolf.

What is interesting is that there were about 150 sled dogs in the village-more than a match for one sick wolf-yet the intruder was left to do her work. Why? Well, the officer explained that to prevent the dogs from fighting and wounding each other, they had each been tied to wooden stakes spaced far enough apart to prevent them from reaching any neighbouring animal.

Because of this, the wolf walked freely among the dogs, killing some and badly wounding others. In isolation they were no match for their foe, and they suffered terribly for it. That is one of the lessons I take for this gospel story. The man walked alone and could not defeat his enemy. But should the community have stood together as Jesus stated to Peter, not even the full power of Hell could stop them.

As this poor man in Mark's account demonstrates, the evil one is like a wolf, watching, circling, always ready to pounce on the one who is in isolation. But a community, powered by Christ's presence and authority is no match for the devil himself. In fact, a community empowered by Christ, frightens the forces of darkness.

I ran across a wonderful story written by Erwin McManus (“*Seizing Your Divine Moment*,” *Preaching Today*, Issue 252). These are his words:

*One summer Aaron went to a youth camp. He was just a little guy, and I was kind of glad because it was a church camp. I figured he wasn't going to hear all those ghost stories, because ghost stories can really cause a kid to have nightmares. But unfortunately, since it was a Christian camp and they didn't tell ghost stories, because they don't believe in ghosts, they told demon and Satan stories instead.*

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*And so, when Aaron got home, he was terrified. “Dad don’t turn off the light!” he said before going to bed. “No, Daddy, could you stay here with me? Daddy, I’m afraid. They told all these stories about demons.” And I wanted to say, “They’re not real.” He goes, “Daddy, Daddy, would you pray for me that I would be safe?” I could feel warm-blanket Christianity beginning to wrap around him, a little line of safety, safety, safety.*

*I said, “Aaron, I will not pray for you to be safe. I will pray that God will make you dangerous, so dangerous that demons flee when you enter the room. And he goes, “All right. But pray I would be really, really, dangerous, Daddy.” Maybe that is what we all need, to stop asking God for the safe life, and instead being daring enough to ask for the dangerous one.*

No enemy ever fears an opponent who plays it safe. No enemy fears anyone who would prefer to sit around and observe than to take up arms. Verse 27 reads, “Amazement gripped the audience”. Is that all we are content to be an amazed audience discussing what has happened?” Is the working of Christ in our midst nothing more than grist for the rumour mill?

Jesus’ presence has a disturbing influence as he confronts the evil and darkness that resides even in religious communities. Are we prepared to approach the very gates of Hell itself in full confidence that together with Christ we shall overcome even the darkest, bleakest, and most evil of circumstances? Are we courageous enough to ask God to make us dangerous to the Devil? I certainly hope so.