

## DEALING WITH DEMONS

Scriptures: Mark 5:1-20; Mark 1:21-28

As a preacher I am fairly adept at avoiding the subject of demons, which is not easy when you preach from the gospel of Mark. If you look closely many, if not most, of Jesus' healings in the gospel of Mark involve demons.

In our first scripture Jesus enters a synagogue and is confronted by a man with an unclean spirit. That is Mark's term for a demon-possessed man. I have preached on this scripture passage three times before, and each time I talked about Jesus' authority and the power of Jesus' word. I said nothing about demons.

In Mark 9 Jesus is presented with a boy who has an unclean spirit. The spirit convulses the boy, and he falls to the ground rolling around and foaming at the mouth. Jesus says to the father, "All things are possible for the one who believes," and the father says, "I believe; help my unbelief." I have preached on this scripture twice before. I went back and looked. Both times I talked about the meaning of faith and doubt and said nothing demons. In fact, in one of the sermons I said, "By the way, this is not going to be a sermon about demons. That will have to be for another time." That was in 2006. You are still waiting to hear my sermon on demons.

Well here it is. Today I can no longer avoid the subject. In Mark chapter 5 Jesus meets a man with a legion of demons, a figure right out of *The Exorcist*. The demons in him are so powerful no one can subdue him. When the demons are cast out, they send a whole herd of pigs rushing madly into the Sea of Galilee where they drown. It is a little hard to preach on this story without talking about demons. So here goes.

Two weeks ago I sat at a table drinking coffee across from a man at the House of Charity. The man was obviously troubled. I told him about the prayer meeting we have every Wednesday morning at the House of Charity and asked him if there was anything we could pray for him. He said, "Pray for deliverance." I said, "Deliverance? What do you mean?" He said, "I need deliverance," and told me the long sad story of his addiction.

I was struck by his use of the term deliverance. This man did not see himself only as an addict. He saw himself as person in bondage. He was in the grip of a power bigger than himself. He was like a hostage in need of some Navy SEALs to come and rescue him.

There are two dangers in that idea. One is the danger that the man will think he is helpless. I asked the man if he had ever been in treatment. He said no. I asked if he went to any groups like Alcoholics Anonymous. He said he did not like groups. The man wanted deliverance, but he didn't want responsibility. He used a belief in demons—though he did not call it that—he used his feeling of being in bondage to excuse himself from responsibility, from doing anything about his situation.

That is the first danger in talking about demons. Talk of demons can undermine a person's sense of power and responsibility. If you see yourself as possessed, you don't have to change. You don't have to take responsibility. You are helpless. You can get away with anything if you claim, "The devil made me do it."

But there is a second danger in talking about demons. It not only excuses the man who is possessed, it also excuses the rest of us from engaging with him. We talk about "demonizing" the enemy, because if you demonize them, you need no longer feel compassion for them, you no longer have to engage them or try to help them. If a man is demon-possessed, there is nothing you can do for him, except throw him in prison. Believing in demons not only excuses the man who is possessed, it also excuses the rest of us from responsibility.

Notice how this works in Mark chapter 5. When approached by Jesus the demon possessed man says, "What have you to do with me, Jesus? Do not torment me." The man uses his demon-possession as an excuse to be left alone, to remain unchanged, not to deal with his condition or his actions. Likewise the people of the town don't really try to engage the man. They don't really try to help him. They simply lock him up, or try to.

Belief in demons can be an excuse for inaction. When we believed that mentally ill people were possessed by demons we locked them away. We began to help them only when we quit thinking about demons and thought instead about disease. When we viewed mental illness as a disease rather than a demon, we began studying ways to treat it, and some of them worked.

That's why I don't like to talk about demons. It excuses our inaction. It gives us a reason to write people off or put them away.

However, the Bible clearly talks about demons. Jesus clearly acknowledges that there are powers in this world which bind us in ways we cannot overcome by ourselves. There is a factor of evil in this world larger than people.

In Ephesians chapter 6 the apostle Paul says, "For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of the present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places." You cannot read the Bible, certainly not the Gospel of Mark, without acknowledging that there is a factor of evil in the world bigger than people. There is a power of evil in the world that cannot be solved by education, medication, legislation, counseling, or force.

I know it sounds like I'm contradicting myself. I just said that we made progress against mental illness when we quit thinking of it as a demon and began to think of it as a disease. We should never use the Bible's description of demons to excuse us from attacking problems with education, medication, counseling, or when necessary incarceration. Nevertheless, if you read the New Testament you have to admit that there is a bigger problem—a spiritual problem—that cannot be solved by teachers, doctors, counselors, or prison guards.

In her book *Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith* Kathleen Norris writes, "Scratch the surface of any ordinary church congregation and you will find not hypocrites but people struggling with demons" (p. 46). She is right. I don't think the church is full of hypocrites; I think it is full of people who are struggling. Call it sin, call it demons, call it the cosmic powers of this present darkness, but scratch the surface of any human life, and what we have is not just a medical problem, a psychological problem, or a political problem, but a spiritual problem. In the words of our prayer of confession this morning: "We are in bondage to sin and cannot free ourselves."

I noticed something this week about the man in the synagogue in our first scripture lesson. Did you notice that there is no indication that the man in the synagogue was in any way dysfunctional? The man in the tombs was a mess. He could not live with anyone; night and day he lived in the tombs, disheveled, howling, bruising himself with stones. He was a mess. But none of that was said about the man in the synagogue. He was in church, for heaven's sake. I picture him in a suit and tie, back when people still wore suits and ties to church. He was probably a respected member of the community. There is not the least indication that anyone in the synagogue wanted to avoid him or bind him with chains. He fit in, until Jesus came along. It was only when he saw Jesus that the demon in him cried out, "What do you have to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth?"

You see, even though this man may have been sitting in church completely clothed and respectable, he had a deep alienation from God that was killing him. He was in bondage to sin and needed someone to deliver him.

You may have a drinking problem or an addiction and go through treatment and be completely sober, but you still are not whole if you are alienated from God. You may have a disease and be treated for that disease and go into remission and be completely healed, but you are still not whole if you are alienated from God. You may have marital problems or problems relating to your parents or children, and you may go through counseling and patch things up. That's great. But you are still not whole if you are alienated from God. You are in bondage to sin, you are captive to the powers of this present darkness, if secretly in your heart, or not so secretly you want Jesus to go away and leave you alone.

But he won't, and that is the miracle of grace. Jesus will not let the demons have the final say. Jesus will not let forces that alienate us from God and from him have the last word. Jesus is Lord of every power in heaven and on earth. And he wants to be your Lord too, if you will let him.

- Ken Onstot  
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