

January 31, 2021
Fourth Sunday of Epiphany

Deut. 18:15-20
Psalm 111
1 Corinthians 8:1-13
Mark 1:21-28

It's hard to resist a good scary story. When I was a kid we always told scary stories at slumber parties. We tried to sneak in to R rated movies to see the latest horror show. And, we loved to drive by the run-down house in town looking in windows to see if there were any ghosts. Now...if you grew up in a small southern town like I did where the Bible was the law of the land and evil was just as real as the shirt on your back, those scary stories carried a little extra weight. As much as we heard about God and God's love, we also heard about the bad things lurking in the dark.

However, the reality of evil is a bit harder to contextualize today. We don't talk about it much and to even bring up the idea of evil spirits or demons feels rather un-Episcopalian. So, what are we to do with our text from Mark? How are we to understand this thing called an unclean spirit? Should we be afraid? Is it even real?

I am not sure that how we define this unclean spirit really matters. What does matter is that this spirit is something that takes us away from God and from community. And, whether or not we believe in evil spirits, we have more likely than not, had their effects take over our lives in one way or another. No, I'm not talking about the scary stories from our childhood that took hold of our imaginations. I'm talking about the kind of spirits that haunt us daily in real life, in real time. Things like depression, addiction, isolation, abuse. Things that tear at our happiness and wholeness. Things that destroy our relationships. Things that we hide away in shame so that no one will know how we are secretly struggling.

These are the demons of our time. We don't need to speculate about their existence because we have already lived among them.

One of my favorite authors is Nadia Bolz-Weber, a Lutheran pastor, who has a way of telling it like it is, honestly, with a raw sense of openness about her own life. She describes these demons as the things that make us do the things we don't want to do, the things that take hold of us, that make us turn away from those who love us dearly. She says this about her own demon:

"I was feeling squirmy about people who talk of evil spirits and demons like they are beings in and of themselves, until I remembered that, at one point in my life, my own depression had felt so present, so much like a character in my life, that it had actually felt right to go ahead and give her a name. I named my depression Frances....Frances first stopped by in my teens and early twenties and was written off by my family as me being "moody." But later, when I found myself coming to like the same things Frances liked – booze, emotionally unstable boyfriends, self-destruction – she finally just moved in, turning my studio apartment into a Wilderness.

She was a terrible roommate. She kept the place filthy and always told me devastating things about myself. When Frances lived with me I was no longer able to do simple things, like remembering if I'd showered or shopping for groceries. I'd stand far too long looking at the dairy case, unable to make a decision about yogurt, and twenty minutes later would just leave the store empty-handed and hungry."

Nadia says that Frances (her depression) hated anything good, like sobriety, exercise, community, eating well, and Jesus. The Jesus part is important. She points out that Jesus is always recognized by demons in the bible. Notice that. In fact, they are usually the first to call Jesus by name. Why? Because demons have no place for good, no place for love, no place for healing. To survive, our demons have to push away all of the things that stand to make us whole. They push us down and try to find ways to thrive at our expense.

But, Jesus doesn't want us to live like that. He doesn't want any of us to live alone, or afraid, or in pain. Only demons do. Instead, Jesus wants restoration.

What is beautiful in our Gospel reading is that Jesus goes directly to the man possessed. He goes to the place everyone else was afraid to go – right beside this man who was overcome with his own demon. We don't know what kind of demon it was or what it might have symbolized. What we do know is that this man was suffering and Jesus didn't turn away. He stepped in and faced this man's pain head on.

Jesus wants all of us to live in wholeness but he also understands the things in this world that bind us from knowing we are loved and that keep us from loving ourselves. Mark describes a man who had lost his voice, lost his control and his dignity, and as a result had lost his community. Whatever destructive habits had taken over his life had also led to his isolation. Maybe you know that type of existence.

But Jesus steps in and says this is no way to live. Jesus steps in to say you will no longer be robbed of well-being and happiness. Jesus steps in to command the demons to leave.

Here's the trick...the demons put up one heck of a fight. If you have ever tried to overcome your own demon or if you have prayed for a loved one trying to overcome theirs you know that it is often a lot harder to heal than to stay in those destructive patterns. As one counselor said, it feels good to feel bad. The demons like it when we stay with them. They will fight harder and harder the more we try to allow good to come in. And they help us come up with all kinds of excuses to keep them around.

So, we stay in bed feeling inadequate. We have another drink to numb our emotions. We pick another fight to make ourselves feel stronger. And maybe it works for a while but we all know that feeling of false satisfaction and manufactured safety doesn't last. Eventually we will always feel empty again and alone and desperate for that demon to fill the void.

But what if when Jesus spoke “Come out”, we too listened. What if we had the courage to name our demons? As one commentator said, if we don’t name the demons, the demons will name us. So, name the demon. Have courage. And with Jesus, begin to do away with all of those harmful patterns of destructive preservation and begin to claim your blessed liberation.

The Gospel promises that Jesus will keep showing up with us. Jesus will keep clearing house and fighting for us. We aren’t meant to live without dignity, without a voice, without community. We aren’t meant to live in pain and suffering.

Last week, in the story of Jonah we were reminded of the importance of second chances...that God keeps giving them, waiting for us to say yes to his incredible gift. This week, we are told that not only are we given a second chance but that Jesus is taking up the fight alongside us.

Whatever you are going through, whatever your friends or family may be struggling with, my prayer for you is that you know you are not alone. Remember that in the Gospel, there is only one ending to the story, there is only one outcome. And that is simply this...God’s love always wins. Amen.