

Demons In Waiting

Luke 8:26-39

June 24, 2007

I.

Here we are, quietly sitting here on a Sunday morning, thoughtfully in prayer, preparing to celebrate the Eucharist, and thinking about holy things. And what happens? We hear a Gospel reading about demons and drowning pigs. What's a preacher to do with a story like this?

Let me start by reviewing some important parts of the reading. This story takes place in Gentile territory on the other side of the Sea of Galilee. That's why there were pigs around. Pigs were unclean to Jews, and Jews never would have raised or eaten them.

Here Jesus encountered a man possessed by many demons, and they knew who Jesus was. They called him "Son of the Most High God," and they begged not to be sent into the abyss, which we know from Scripture as being the final destination of Satan and his demons after the second coming.

To avoid the abyss the demons asked to go into a nearby herd of swine, and Jesus gave permission although he did not actually send them. The demons entered the pigs on their own, and the entire herd, which in Mark's version of this story numbered about two thousand pigs, rushed into the water and drowned.

We do not know if the demons drove the pigs into the water, or if the pigs were spooked by the demons and stampeded into the water taking the surprised demons with them into what might have been a type of abyss. We also do not know if the demons were destroyed, or not.

The local people then demanded that Jesus depart and leave them alone. And next, an important thing happened. The man who had been possessed asked to go with Jesus, and Jesus said no. He did not say "follow me" as he usually did, but instead told the man to go home and "declare how much God had done for him." The man thus became the first Gentile missionary.

II.

With this background, I want to do two things. The first is to talk about demons, and to affirm that the demons Jesus cast out in today's reading and elsewhere in the Bible were real then, and are real today. The second is to emphasize that the power of evil is too strong for us to resist on our own, and that our only comfort is turning away from it and relying upon our Lord and Savior to transform us and close the door on these dark forces.

And I should say that some preachers and theologians avoid the subject of demons. It is just too uncomfortable, and perhaps they don't even think demons exist. I have described this type of thinking before as "salad bar spirituality." You know how a salad bar works. You make your salad, select what you like, and just pass over the things that don't seem as appealing.

Some people look at faith the same way. They pick and choose to create a taste-good, feel-good religion that has all of the things they like without any of the uncomfortable ideas that are part of some important biblical teachings.

For those who adopt this brand of postmodern Christianity, religion has become a consumer item. If you like it, buy it. If not, leave it on the shelf. If it works for you, that's what counts. Today, however, I am going to talk about these evil parts of the spiritual world because it is a realm that does exist, it is something we don't fully understand, and it is more powerful than we might think.

III.

As you know, C.S. Lewis was a prominent Anglican theologian. He wrote *The Screwtape Letters*, a fictional but revealing account of letters from a senior demon to his nephew demon about turning people away from God. It is fairly short, and I recommend it to you. Lewis says in the introduction, "there are two equal and opposite errors into which [people] can fall about devils. One is to disbelieve in their existence. The other is to believe, and to feel an excessive and unhealthy interest in them."

Today I hope to find that middle road. I think it is found in Ephesians 6:12, which states "our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms." And "heavenly realms" does not mean "Heaven," with a capital "H" as the dwelling place of God, but rather refers to what you see at night when you go outside and look up into the sky, and this world is part of that realm.

Scripture tells us that demons exist, and provides several examples in the various Gospels of demon possession. And the symptoms of those examples in Scripture unfortunately are found in some people today. We normally do not call it demon possession, but rather use contemporary medical and psychiatric names. And that's because in most cases they really are medical or psychiatric conditions. But not always.

There are times when exorcisms are appropriate. The Episcopal Church recognizes this. In our *Book of Occasional Services*, which is exactly what its name implies; a book of services not used on a regular basis, there is a provision for exorcisms on page 174.

Let me read it to you, and this is our church talking, not me. It says, "the practice of expelling evil spirits by means of prayer and set formulas derives its authority from the Lord himself who identified these acts as signs of his messiahship. Very early in the life of the Church the development and exercise of such rites were reserved to the bishop, at whose discretion they might be delegated to selected presbyters and others deemed competent. In accordance with this established tradition, those who find themselves in need of such a ministry should make the fact known to the bishop, through their parish priest, in order that the bishop may determine whether exorcism is needed, who is to perform the rite, and what prayers or other formularies are to be used."

So, we are told by the Episcopal Church that evil spirits and exorcisms are real things, and that we should not try this at home. We do not look under "E" in the Yellow Pages, and are instructed to call the Bishop. And one of the most important things the Bishop must do is determine, one way or the other, whether the situation is one with medical or psychiatric origins, or truly warrants an exorcism.

Another example is the Church of England, which has an official exorcist in every diocese. These are not trivial positions, and exist for a reason. The Catholic Church also takes demons and exorcism seriously. The official exorcist of the Vatican recently said that of every one thousand cases in which an exorcist is called for help, there are about thirty instances of what he called "demonic obsession, infestation, or disturbance," and of those, in only five or six cases is someone "genuinely possessed."

The point of all this is that today's Gospel is not a fictional or symbolic account of demons in the world. They were actual spiritual beings then, and there is no basis for thinking that anything has changed in two thousand years. If we accept that demons were real when Jesus was alive, then we are compelled to accept that they are real now. And while we must be very, very careful about the dangers of confusing demon possession with mental illness or behavioral disorders, we cannot just dismiss or ignore the reality of evil as a spiritual force in this broken world.

IV.

So, should we worry about demon possession in our lives? Probably not. For most of us the problem is not the end stage of actual demonic possession but earlier stages of evil influences that require not exorcism, but faith and closeness to God. These demons have symbolic or figurative names depending on what they do.

There is the demon of idolatry that causes us to put material worldly things ahead of what our Lord wants us to do. There is the demon of greed and power that causes us to be so focused on ourselves that we place our own desires ahead of our families, friends, and loved ones. And there is the demon of deception that tells us we can remake Christianity into a secular model we can live with rather than accepting it as a spiritual model to live by. I could mention other examples.

There actually are two things at work here. Last week I talked about sin and disobedience, and how all of us at some time or another will stumble and need to ask for forgiveness. That is part of our human nature, and might or might not result from evil spiritual influences. This week, however, the subject is more serious. This sermon is focused on the reality of evil spiritual forces that can, on exceptional occasions, become embedded within some people and take control of their lives.

So, how can people protect themselves? What can they do to make it unnecessary for the priest to have to contact the Bishop? The answer is that they, and we, are called to simply turn away from these evil and corrupting influences and turn toward our Lord and Savior. In this way we reject evil in all of its manifestations, whether it is actually demonic possession or lesser demonic influences that still separate us from God.

We cannot fight these evil powers on our own. They are just too strong, and we fool ourselves if we think we can avoid evil just on the basis of our own strength and abilities. But Jesus can be our strength. We saw in today's Gospel that the physical strength of the demon possessed man was no match for the spiritual strength of Jesus.

In a way the question is not how close we might be to evil and darkness, but rather how far we might be from God and light. If we focus our Christian journey on that which is good, and place our faith in the saving power of our Lord Jesus Christ, there will be no room for evil powers to become established within us. As in today's Gospel, they will have to do their destructive work elsewhere. By opening the door to the Holy Spirit and Jesus Christ we close the door to everything that is not from God.

When I was a lawyer I had some clients that never wanted to do all of the things they should have done to protect themselves from legal liability. I used to tell them that I had two phone numbers. One was 911, and the other was 411. They could wait until they had an emergency and call me on 911, and that would have a certain cost. Or they could take action earlier and call me on 411 and get the information they needed, which would cost less.

Humanity is in a similar situation. People can wait, do things their own way, and run the risk of finding themselves in a 911 emergency. Or they can take the 411 approach now and get the information they need to avoid the emergency. And that information once again is set forth in chapter six of the Book of Ephesians, which says to "put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil . . . so that you may be able to withstand on that evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm."

V.

Today's reading operates at more than one level. Certainly it is an entertaining story about demon possessed pigs and how those demons might have suffered the exact fate they wanted

to avoid. But it also tells us that we must take seriously the spiritual forces of evil in the world because they are here, and because they want to draw us away from our faith .

And finally, today's reading points beyond itself and shows us, once again, God's action in Jesus Christ for the benefit of all humanity. All we have to do is turn to him and he will shelter us from the darkness that lies in wait. *Amen.*