

No Room For Evil

Luke 8:26-39

June 20, 2010

I.

Sometimes Bible stories can catch us off-guard. Here we are, quietly and thoughtfully in prayer, preparing to celebrate the Eucharist, and thinking about holy things. And then what? We hear a Gospel reading about demons and drowning pigs. That might change the mood a little.

And there are many stories in the Bible about demons, but this is a classic. If I were going to make a movie about Jesus and demons, I would pick today's reading as the basis for the script. Mark's Gospel also describes the same scene, and tells us the herd consisted of two thousand pigs. Imagine a 3-D version with that many squealing demonic pigs thundering out of the screen.

But, back to the reading. Let's review some of its important parts. The 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 who knew who Jesus was. They called him "Son of the Most High God," and begged not to be sent into the abyss, which Scripture identifies as 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 immediately rushed into the sea and drowned.

We don't 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. Jesus did teach later in Luke that demons do not like water. He said they seek dry places for rest (11:24).

The local people then demanded that Jesus leave. They blamed him for the loss of their pigs. And next, something important happened. The man who had been possessed asked to go with Jesus. But Jesus did not say "follow me" as he usually did, but rather told him to go home and "declare how much God had done for him." This man thus became the first Gentile missionary.

II.

This is a good story that presents some interesting questions. In our post-modern society we might wonder if demons really exist. We have made significant advances in the study of mental and emotional illnesses, and today we probably can find psychiatric labels that fit most of the symptoms of demonic possession described in the Bible.

And I have heard preachers begin their sermons with brief references to biblical descriptions of actual demonic possession, but then quickly shift to discussions of symbolic or metaphorical demons. They talk about the so-called demons of addiction, or the demons of depression, or they associate the term "demon" with other afflictions but leave unanswered the question of actual demonic existence.

I will not do that today. Instead I want to do three things. The first is 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 affirm the importance of both clinical and spiritual skills in diagnosing and treating disorders that are not brought about by actual demonic possession, but that could be grounded in the objective evil of demonic or satanic influences.

And the third is to emphasize that the power of evil is too strong for us to resist on our own, and that our only comfort is to turn away from it and rely upon our Lord and Savior to protect us and close the door on these dark forces.

III.

Most of us have heard of C.S. Lewis, a prominent Anglican theologian well-known for his popular book, *Mere Christianity*. He also wrote *The Screwtape Letters*, a fictional account of letters from a senior demon, named Screwtape, to his nephew junior demon, named Wormwood, about turning a person, known as "The Patient," away from God. I understand a movie about it is in the works.

Lewis made an important point in the introduction. He said, "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."

There is, however, a middle road between Lewis' two extremes. The Book of Ephesians 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" (6:12).

And "heavenly realms" here does not mean "Heaven" as the dwelling place of God, but rather what you see at night when you look up into the sky, and our world is part of that realm.

Scripture tells us demons exist, and the Gospels offer many examples of their being cast out by Jesus. Today we would use the term "exorcism," and many people would not take it seriously. I would point out, however, that the Episcopal Church recognizes its reality.

We have a companion volume to the *Book of Common Prayer*, and it's called the *Book of Occasional Services*. It is exactly what its name implies; a book of services not used on a regular basis, and there actually is a provision for exorcisms on page 174.

Let me read part of it, and this is our church talking, not me. It says, "The practice of expelling evil spirits derives its authority from the Lord. Very early in the Church the development and exercise of such rites were reserved to the bishop, at whose discretion they might be delegated to [those] 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 officially are told by our 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, but are told to call the Bishop. And we certainly would not trouble our Bishops if demons were imaginary.

Another example is the Church of England, which has an official exorcist in every diocese. The Catholic Church also takes demons and exorcism seriously and has a liturgy for it. Similar provisions can be found in Lutheran and Methodist denominations.

The point is that today's Gospel is not a fictional account of demons in the world. The Bible is clear that there were actual spiritual beings then, and there is no reason to think anything has changed now. If we accept that demons were real when Jesus was alive, then we are compelled to accept that they are real now.

IV.

But we also must be very careful about the dangers of confusing demon possession with mental illness or behavioral disorders. This is my second point. Most cases of destructive or anti-

social behavior are not caused by demonic possession, which is one of the reasons Episcopal priests must call their Bishops before assuming the worst. And the Bishops in turn would call upon other medical and psychiatric advice before actually attempting an exorcism.

However, let's take one step back. Just because people might not be possessed by evil does not mean they cannot be influenced or motivated by evil. History is full of examples of unspeakable evil on a large scale, and we see it every day on a smaller scale. We cannot just dismiss or ignore the reality of evil as a spiritual force in this broken world.

And although demons might only infrequently possess people, they regularly draw people away from God, or cause them to deny God, or make them ineffective witnesses in the world. And while many manifestations of evil often are assumed to have clinical origins, we should not dismiss the possibilities of spiritual remedies. Sometimes a confessional might be better than a couch.

V.

This leads to my final point. Should we worry about demonic possession in our lives? Probably not. For most people the problem would not be demonic possession but rather evil influences that require not exorcism, but faith and closeness to God.

Today's Gospel shows us that spiritual warfare is not a battle between two evenly matched forces. Jesus easily prevailed over the demons. But Jesus had to be there in order for it to happen. Evil cannot defeat good. It can only win by default when good does not show up.

Even so, Satan and his forces are too strong for us to fight on our own. We fool ourselves if we think we can avoid evil just on the basis of our own will or abilities. But calling on Jesus will strengthen us and enable us to do what we cannot do on our own.

The question then is not how close we are to evil and darkness, but rather how far we are from God and light. If we focus our lives 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 be established within us. As in today's Gospel, they will have to do their destructive work elsewhere. By opening the door to Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit, we close the door to everything that is not from God.

When I was a lawyer I had a few clients that typically delayed doing the things they should have done to protect themselves from legal consequences. 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 spiritual emergency. Or they can take the 411 approach now and get the information they need to avoid the emergency.

And for us that information also is found in 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" (6:13). It means to cover ourselves with the Lord, through prayer, Scripture, and support of our church community.

Our reading today certainly it is an entertaining story about demon possessed pigs, and how those demons might have suffered a fate similar to that which 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 real and want to draw us away from our faith. And it tells us that all we have to do is turn to our Lord Jesus Christ, and he will shelter us from the darkness that lies in wait. *Amen.*