

## Demons

### Mark 1: 21-28

Whether it is a brand new argument among medical experts or an age old argument among theologians, whether it is someone suffering from a paralyzing depression or someone clandestinely seeking an exorcist, throughout history women and men have suffered by what we sometimes call the demonic. Some of us believe in the cosmic forces that look like the dark spirits rising up from the dying murderers in *Ghost*. Some of us say: no such thing.

In Jesus' day the demonic and the angelic were accepted as true. Those folks had a different world view. Divine messengers were real. The threshold between heaven and earth was thin, porous, passable. And over and over again in the Gospel Jesus tries to get people to listen to his words about darkness and light. That there is a powerful dark force that you should take seriously is a core theme of the Jesus narrative. How you come down on this—whether demons are the debatable classifications of psychiatry or minions of the Satan is something for you to ponder. But what we cannot deny is that Scripture is full of words that illustrate, agonize over and dramatize this. So what is it all about? And what does it mean to you? Let's start with the lean and mean story in Mark.

This episode is so typical of the way Mark tells the Jesus story. In eight lean verses he writes volumes about the nature of humanity and of God, about sin and Spirit, about who sees the truth of Jesus right away and who does not. Because it is that important, let's study it the way it deserves to be studied. Let's not allow it to be a few words that graze the outside of our ears while we make sure our cell phones are on vibrate, or dream about

what we will have for dinner, or dream about spring training. Let's learn, as we move through Lent, to let the word go from ink on a page, or blah-blah from a reader, to branding on a soul. Let's dare to face some demons, maybe even our own.

In Mark, this searing story is the beginning of Jesus' miracle ministry. Remember, we are in chapter one. All we know so far, according to Mark, is that Jesus has been baptized, tempted, started preaching and recruited his disciples. But this is the very first razzle-dazzle display of the miracles that live inside of him. This is his first "man, you are not going to believe what I just saw!" act. This story tells us who he is and why he came. Note the specific time and place; this is very important. It is the Sabbath, the holy day. He goes to the synagogue; that is where the faithful gather. He goes to teach. That is his purpose for going there. To teach. That is what he keeps trying to do in Mark: teach. There is no indication that he is hunting witches or stalking demons. But he keeps getting interrupted by broken people and by sick people and by desperate people and by possessed people. They just seem to find him. Maybe they have more reason to find him, more need of him, more understanding of him, than those who are sure they are whole, well, sane and in control.

Jesus just wants to teach and, Mark says, the people are just blown away by his teaching. He teaches with authority; he speaks with power. Think about a time when you were really moved, transformed even, by the words of a great teacher, by something you learned, by something that changed the way you saw and thought and lived. That is how Jesus teaches, and it is what he comes to do. But he, like us, cannot always do what he wants to do. He is interrupted by aching people and by needy people and by crazy people and by dirty nasty beings that take over soul territory, that

move in uninvited or, more likely, that are let in willingly before we realize we have been had. Think weeds. Squatters. Invaders. Aliens. Unclean spirits. Demons. Think of what they do. They choke. Litter. Take over. De-energize. Pervert. Twist. Diminish. Demean. Dominate. Destroy. But they do not listen to teachers.

Jesus, the teacher, is not boring like some of those deadly scribes; the Sunday crowd is juiced. Enthralled. This guy is good! There is something different about him. There is something different in his words, and there will be something shockingly different in his actions. And this is most important, this something different, this power and authority, because of what will happen next, because of what is needed to deal with forces beyond the power of the people and the scribes. Real early on Mark lets us know that Jesus is not religion as usual. And with his characteristic use of words like immediately, the terse and action oriented Mark writes: “Just then...” “Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit.” Just then there was something that didn’t listen to the teaching, that didn’t care about the teaching, that interrupted the teaching. Just then there was something that saw more of the truth of Jesus than those who did not yet understand who was talking to them. Just then. Just then. The dark things, the hurtful things are like that. They do not wait until the time is convenient, until the teaching is over. Just then. Just then.

There is no mention of demons here, not in our translation. The man, it says, is “possessed with an unclean spirit”. Think dirty, filthy, unholy. Think something you do not want to touch. Someone whose eyes you do not want to see. You know: all those guys with their cardboard signs hovering around the busy intersection. In the text, “‘Unclean spirit’...is a common Jewish designation for a demon...In this context ‘unclean’...connotes not a

moral (or sexual) fault, but rather something that is ‘opposed to the holy.’ In the OT the command to be ‘holy’ like God...implies life, wholeness and completeness...whereas ‘unclean’ suggests something that should not be, something out of place.”<sup>1</sup> And possessed. What a word! He is taken over by, owned by, in the clutches of. This is a big deal. God is pure. God is Holy. God is clean. And there are all kinds of rules and regulations about eating clean and being clean and not touching anything or anyone who isn’t clean. So the folks who are there for the brilliant rhetoric, for the hip-hop, for the rhymes, for the verbal fireworks, for the intellectual high, are probably jolted when an alien voice—or voices—cries out: “What have you to do with us?”

What the hell? Who is talking and who are they talking to? No question that the ones who are talking know exactly who Jesus is, while all the good people are trying to figure it out. The ones who see Jesus, who recognize Jesus, who want nothing to do with Jesus, who know his power, are the demons.

“What do you have to do with us” is one loaded question; it is a cosmic question, an eschatological question. That is a question that sets up the first miracle, the first action, of Jesus’ ministry. “What do you have to do with us?” That question lets us know that the demon knows who Jesus is, that the demon knows the power Jesus has, that the demon knows it isn’t a good day to be a demon. They recognize him. They acknowledge him. They name him. He is the Holy One of God. This is a very unique and lofty title. It means Jesus is consecrated. He is called out. He is the opposite of the demonic. “What have you to do with us Jesus of Nazareth?” And Jesus, who just wants to do some teaching, responds instead to this taunting question,

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<sup>1</sup> John R. Donahue, S.J. and Daniel J. Harrington, S. J. *The Gospel of Mark* (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 2002), 80.

responds to this craziness, responds to this darkness within that poor, possessed soul. He turns and, in one simple sentence, commands those filthy spirits to shut up and to get out. No magic wands. No mirrors. Just the words. Just his words. Just his commands. Shut up. Get out. And that was that.

Now what do all of us—sophisticated, educated folks sitting here—do with all of that? How do we name them, those critters that hurl the man to the ground and, ignoring Jesus’ command to be quiet, make a dramatic and screaming exit? What would we call them? Unclean spirits? Paranoia? Addiction? Or are they actual beings that come from a dark place? Since before the time of Jesus we have come up with hundreds of ways of explaining what is wrong with someone who is possessed, obsessed, not themselves, out of their minds, sick. What we call it (or them) depends on who is doing the calling. Preachers. Psychiatrists. Writers of self help books. Talk show hosts. But what does Mark mean? Carolyn Schneider writes that “...demonic possession is Mark’s metaphor for alien ownership.”<sup>2</sup> Again. Demonic possession in Mark is a metaphor for alien ownership.

Alien ownership. Interesting concept. It means that something owns us that should not own us. It means that something controls us that should not control us. It is a vivid metaphor for malady and misery. How many movies or comic books or cartoons have you seen where something—some alien creature or force—takes over someone else’s body? We are intrigued by this idea of the authentic life force being sucked out of a being and an alien taking up residence. From *Men in Black* to *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* to *Aliens* this image is presented to us over and over again. And it works because it symbolizes our sense that we can be invaded by another

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.crossings.org/theology/theolo205.htm>

force, that we are in danger of being taken over, that we must carefully cling to, and vigilantly defend, self. We have this sense that we can somehow be hijacked or possessed. Somewhere deep inside we know that something threatens us. Something tempts us. Why do you think all that “come to the dark side” imagery in *Star Wars* hits us deep within, below the popcorn and the Coca-Cola?

This is, perhaps, because there is an emptiness in each of us that alien forces find inviting. Think about that place in you. It is the place that Robert Frost calls our desert place. It is the place that playwrights and painters and songwriters dramatize and paint and sing about. And, after you imagine these images and words in your mind, think about the things you use, the things we use, to fill that empty place. Those things are the things that, if we do not choose them wisely, threaten to become our demons. They threaten to take us over. They threaten to possess us. Something, hear me, something, will fill that space. And it is that something that threatens to become your demon.

There is a space inside of each of us that needs to be filled, and that can only be filled, by God. We long for God to be with us, to sense God’s presence. If that God space in us is not filled by God it cannot actually be filled by anything else. It can feel like it is filled, but it is never really ok. We try to fill the void with something that doesn’t belong, something that makes us feel dis-ease, discomfort, dismay, something that makes us feel like things are screwed up. Even worse, we fill it with addiction, with obsession, or with a consuming hatred. Picture the addict who pops in pills, who pours in booze, who shoves in food, who works 24/7, who maxes out every credit card, who trades integrity for approval, who barter values for acceptance, who shovels lie after lie into the crevices of that empty space.

But none of it is ever, ever enough. No. Still the haunting chill of emptiness causes us to shiver. And, because we somehow know this, we say, with sophisticated assurance: “we all have our demons.” We say, at funerals: “for God’s sake. He had his demons.” We nod. We shake our heads as we try to express the inexpressible. What are we trying to say? What are we trying to explain? And yet, although we can often see, with great clarity, another’s demons, we cannot see our own. Is it because to really see them, to chose to name them, would be to admit our need to come to Jesus as the only one with the power to banish them, to come to Jesus as Lord? Is it because we are ultimately terrified of the space that the exiting demon would leave behind? Is the chasm more frightening to us than the demon?

To answer these questions, think of all the God words you can. If I were to ask you to name the first five adjectives that come to your mind to try to define God, what would you say? Whatever those God-defining words are, think of their opposites. Those are the demon words. If God is pure, demons are impure. If God is holy, demons are unholy. If God is truth, demons are lies. If God is creation, demons are annihilation. If God steals nothing, demons steal everything. If demons rob us of choice, God, in God’s grace and mercy, gives us the gift of freedom. Demons rob us, above all, of choice, or at least make us feel like we have no choice. Addiction is believing in the core of our beings that we have no choice.

Demons are all about power struggles, about taking away our power to choose, about corrupting and perverting and twisting and distorting. Evil has no power to create, so its minions take what exists and use it, abuse it, destroy it. When one takes hold, like a barnacle or a leech or a sycophant, when something possesses us that should not possess us, we need help. Whether your demon is one of the obvious ones, one of the blatant

addictions that ruin self and family and society, or is one of the more subtle and insidious ones, the ones that kills us ever so meticulously and slowly, you need help. Whether the demon can be treated by an earthly doctor or ultimately needs the power of the Lord Jesus you need help. You need help because demons are all about power struggles and you are the pawn and the prize.

I know. It is not cool to go where this is taking us. I, like Jesus, would rather be teaching. But there is no avoiding this. Jesus, at that seminal moment in the beginning of Mark, becomes involved in a life and death struggle that will lead him to the cross. This is serious. This is unavoidable. This is why he came. And the way that Mark writes it, the order in which he writes it—that Jesus chooses to be baptized, that Jesus is tempted like us, that he teaches with an authority that was new and amazing—all prepare us for that moment when he says: “Be silent and come out of him!”

Oh my Lord, she said (sounding very much like the old time preacher) we all have something that needs to go. What would Jesus order out of you? We all have something that grabs hold of us and drags us down to the ugly places. We all have something that separates us from others and from God and from authentic self. We all have something that controls us more than we control it. We all have something that recognizes Jesus before we do and cries out: stay away from me and let me alone. We all have something that can only be exorcised, only be expelled, only be cast out by the power of God.

Enter Jesus. Jesus is the exorcist. Jesus was the exorcist in this early story in Mark and is the exorcist in the later story of you and me. And the reason he can be that and do that is that he experienced, he confronted, he came face to face and name to name with his own demons. He could tell

them to go to hell because he knew that's where they belonged. They recognized him and he recognized them. We can't do the hard work our faith demands if we don't admit and embrace our own flaws and weaknesses and essential humanity. If God became human we should try it too! Perhaps there are too many who call themselves Christians who think their commitment is to a church and not to Christ. Don't you see? His lesson plan was interrupted. Sometimes you have to go where the demons are. But you never have to go alone.

As it was with Jesus so it is with us. For us to be healers, we must be healed. For us to touch others hearts, we must allow our own to be touched. For us to help others name their demons we must name our own. As Rita Brock wrote: "Naming the demons means knowing the demons...The Gospels imply that anyone who exorcises cannot be a stranger to demons...To have faced our demons is never to forget their power to hurt and never to forget the power to heal that lies in touching that broken heartedness...Jesus hears, below the demon noises, an anguished cry of deliverance."<sup>3</sup>

Reverend Sharon Smith. The Gathering of Baltimore, February 28<sup>th</sup>, 2021

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<sup>3</sup> *Imaging the Word*, Volume 3 (Cleveland? United Church Press, 1996), 130.