

Casting Out Demons

Sermon 88 | Greystone Baptist Church | January 31, 2021

Mark 1: 21-28

It is always a difficult task to deal with a text like the one in focus today. Everything in the story, from ancient Sabbath practices to the Capernaum synagogue we struggle to recognize or relate to anyone or anything in the narrative. Sure, we can imagine what the drama might have looked like as it unfolded because we might remember the felt board models from children's church or Sunday school. Or maybe we have seen the pictures in our bibles illustrating the Galilean geography. With these images we can begin to piece it together. We can imagine Jesus teaching in the synagogue but then something strange happens, a man with an "unclean spirit" shows up, Jesus talks to the demons that possess the man before performing an exorcism, and just like that we are thrust right back into the realms of the unbelievable and unrelatable.

Perhaps this is because our primary experience with exorcisms and demons are carefully scripted and produced by Hollywood elites. Their goal of course, is to thrill us with scary images that – at the same time – give us nightmares and keep our eyes glued to the big screen. I have never been drawn to that kind of cinematic experience. Instead, I find myself adopting the philosophy my mom always told me: "There are enough things in this world to keep me scared awake at night... I don't need the movies to provide me with any more things to be afraid of."

Even though it isn't my favorite genre, I do understand why films like *The Exorcist* have a certain appeal. We are spiritual beings, born of God and set on this earth with an intrinsic appetite for the supernatural. We are curious about the mysteries of God and all things that are beyond our comprehension. Demon possession is certainly one of those incomprehensible phenomena. And it has been for a long, long time.

Here is what some of the earliest Christians had say about it in their writings:

For we do continually beseech God by Jesus Christ to preserve us from the demons which are hostile to the worship of God, and whom we are of old time served... -Justin Martyr, year 160 Common Era.

The Greek poets were inspired by demons. "This is clearly evidenced by the fact that even today demons are exorcised from possessed in the name of the true God, and the deceiving spirits confess themselves that they are the demons who once worked in the poets..." – Theophilus of Antioch, year 180 Common Era.

Perhaps a more famous writer, Origen, says in 235 CE: *It is not by incantations that Christians seem to prevail (over evil spirits), but by the name of Jesus, accompanied by the announcement of the narratives which relate to him; for the repetition of these has frequently been the means of driving demons out of men, especially when those who repeated them did so in a sound and genuinely believing spirit. Such power, indeed, does*

the name of Jesus possess over evil spirits, that there have been instances where it was effectual, when it was pronounced even by bad men..."

In these writings we see that the early Christians considered demons to be "hostile to the worship of God" but also able to be driven out by the "name of Jesus and the narratives which relate to him." Demons are hostile to the worship of God and driven out by the repetition of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. ...that doesn't sound like Hollywood.

By the third century, exorcisms had worked their way into regular Christian practices. Hippolytus develops a pre-baptism liturgy of exorcism in which the baptismal candidate would repeat the phrase, *"If anybody has a demon, then let him not hear the Word from the teacher before he has been cleansed,"* before being submerged into the water. Even before that, from the moment a desire to be baptized was expressed until the baptism actually happened, the candidate would participate in a daily ritual of laying on hands with exorcism. This would begin the process of driving out unclean spirits long before the water-side liturgy could be repeated.¹

Some Christian denominations, those we often call "charismatic" or "holiness" traditions still engage in rituals of exorcism to this day, citing scriptures like the one we read today and writings like these from the earliest expressions of Christianity as the foundation of their practice. Mainline groups have a more hesitant approach, providing exorcisms or "blessings" for houses, rooms, buildings, and yes sometimes even people... but only in rare circumstances when they are directly invited.

A presbyterian pastor tells a story about being in his office one day near Christmastime when a young man stopped by to see him. This young man was not a member of his church, nor did he know the pastor, but he came in search of a "blessing". The pastor entered the office room where the young man was waiting, assuming that by "blessing" what the stranger wanted was probably money. But when the pastor opened the door, the man didn't look anything like what he was expecting. Whereas he expected dirty skin and tattered clothing, the young man who stood before him was well-dressed and clean shaven. He didn't even have those glassy eyes the pastor had come to recognize as evidence one had been living on the streets.

After apologizing for taking up the pastor's time, the young man went on to explain he was just there for a blessing. He felt he had been struggling, living "with the devil on his back," and he just needed somebody to bless him so the devil would go away. After explaining that this is not exactly what Presbyterians do, the pastor continued to search for excuses to send the young man away, but the man interrupted, "All I want, is your blessing."

"Well, it is Christmas" the pastor thought. "Tell me your name." he said to the young man. "My name is Andy," he said as he knelt down on the floor to receive his blessing.

¹ Historical quotes retrieved from: <https://www.lausanne.org/content/historical-overview-1> on Jan. 28, 2021

The pastor put his hand on Andy's shoulders and said a prayer that began with thanksgiving for Andy's life, then recognized that God was already present within him. After that the pastor asked God to take away this "devil" that was preventing Andy from being the kind of person God wanted him to be, and then he ended the prayer with "Amen."

Andy stood up and thanked the pastor before leaving his office and the church. The two never saw one another again leaving the pastor with more questions than answers. Was his prayer effective even though it didn't sound or look like the exorcisms he'd seen on TV? Was there really a "devil on Andy's back"? And would he ever see the young man again? One thing is certain, though. If Andy was cleansed on that day, it was not by any work or word the pastor proclaimed in the office, but only by the power of holy mystery.²

You see, when it comes to calling out demons, there is so much we will never understand.

When Jesus encountered the man with the unclean spirit in Capernaum, he was teaching in the synagogue, a task usually reserved for scribes and priests. Jesus, claiming divine authority, set about doing sacred work in sacred space, on the most sacred day. While others around might have been wondering to themselves, "Who is this guy?" The man possessed by unclean spirits knew exactly who he was and they cried out: "What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth?" They know who he is because they are threatened by him, and from their place of grave insecurity they mock and belittle him, reminding Jesus and everyone else in the room that he is just a carpenter's boy from a no-name town called Nazareth. Jesus, refusing to give in and claiming the authority given him through birth and baptism speaks and that which was unclean comes pouring out.

Maybe it is a bit of a stretch for us to imagine ourselves in the synagogue that day. What would we have been thinking when those evil spirits came out crying and convulsing? Maybe it's too much for us to picture it, especially after we have been conditioned to think about unclean spirits on Hollywood's terms – glassy eyes, strange speech, nonsensical and spastic movements. But maybe such spirits still exist like those early Christian writers described as *that which is hostile to the worship of God*.

I can think of a lot of things which are hostile to the worship of God. If the worship of God is built on the proclamation of the Gospel (what Origen called *the announcement of the narratives that accompanied Jesus*), then that which is hostile to the worship of God is that which subverts, ignores, or undermines the work of God's kingdom trying to break into this world. Things like greed and arrogance, selfishness and self-righteousness, hatred and anger, perhaps these are the names of our unclean spirits? These can so often come to us like Andy in the pastor's office dressed up in nice clothing, with good manners, and unassuming faces. Maybe we also have some collective demons that we need to call out so that we can get back to the work of the Gospel, demons that bubble up in the cries of racism and white supremacy and convulse like the tides of extreme Christian nationalism,

² story about Andy and the pastor is from P.C. Enniss' column on "Pastoral Perspective," in *Feasting on the Word* commentary series, Year B, Volume 1. p 310-312.

things that we would like to pretend exist only in our past and yet they walk right into our sacred spaces wondering if we will be bold enough to name them, to call them out, and cast them away once and for all.

Perhaps these are the names of our demons, our unclean spirits... do they sound familiar?

Maybe you can think of a few more names to add to our list?

Some interpreters of the Bible would argue that demon possession and the presence of unclean spirits are sort of like the miracles of the Bible. They were really common back then, when Jesus walked the earth, but now they're much fewer and farther between. But the more I read the early Christian writers and pay attention to how they described the unclean spirits and the demons that they encountered, the more I am beginning to believe that they never went away, they just took on new forms, new names, and started showing up in different ways. And I am also beginning to believe that as that has happened, people of faith and good conscience have been a little too timid at times about calling out those demons when they began to rear their ugly heads. In so doing, we have surrendered ourselves to the insult of the evil one who says things like: "Who are you to call me out?" "You're nobody from nowhere" ... "By what authority do you challenge me here, on this day?"

And I wonder how long it would take for us, if we were to do as Hippolytus wanted, to lay hands on one another, covering each other in prayers that called out all the demons, all that was unclean within us and cast it all out so that we could be free to accept and proclaim the Good News that is the Gospel of Jesus Christ. What if we took our baptismal vows so seriously that we prayed those kinds of prayers for ourselves and for one another?

*Create in me a clean heart, O God.
Cast out all that is evil and unclean
Purge from me all that is selfish and full of greed
Take away from my heart the desire to be right all the time and*

*Fill me with your abundant grace and mercy
Such that I cannot help but be gracious and merciful with everyone around me
Replace that which is sinful within me
Remove all the many devils on my back
Free me to live unburdened so that I can walk more lightly with you.*

We may not recognize them, if we're looking for demons that resemble those on the movie screen. But sisters and brothers, we are surrounded by them. And we may not always know what to say or do to call them out and cast them away... but God does. So perhaps in the days ahead, we can open our eyes and our hearts a little more, asking God to show us all that is unclean within us, around us, and among us. And as God opens our eyes to all that might have been concealed, let us have the courage to let the Holy Spirit speak through us, casting out every single one.