



St. Andrew's By-the-Sea
The Episcopal Church
in Destin, Florida

The Fifth Sunday
After Epiphany
February 4, 2024

A Homily by the Rev. James J. Popham

Jesus casting out demons may bring to mind the motion picture *The Exorcist*. It was a stark cinematic expression of the forces of good and evil – and the ultimate power of God. The reading from the Gospel according to Mark this morning says just as much. And thrusts us deeply into the mythology common to first century observers and followers of Christ.

What we might make of that mythology today? Do we see demons as evil spirits that possess the complicit – or even the unsuspecting, as in the case of *The Exorcist*? Or do we take the modern view that what Jesus and his disciples were doing was healing those afflicted by various physical afflictions like epilepsy, or mental illnesses such as bi-polar disorder? Which takes us back to those three most important things to consider when interpreting Scripture: context, context, and context.

At the time of Christ, people generally “saw the world as inhabited by numerous spirits, good and evil, that could influence or dominate human life for good or evil.”¹ That Jesus would be described as casting out demons, therefore, should come as no surprise.

¹ M. Eugene Boring and Fred C. Craddock, “Excursus: Satan, the Devil, and Demons in Biblical Theology,” *The People's New Testament Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster John Know Press, 2004) 128.

The author of the Gospel according to Mark had done no residency in psychiatry. In the context of his time, Jesus only could be described as casting out demons.

Whether we might describe or explain Jesus' actions differently today is a matter of debate. But what is beyond debate is the existence of evil in the world. Anyone who follows the news knows that.

And evil is more than a collection of individual sinful acts. Evil also can be systemic. It can become enfolded in the DNA of a community or a nation or a culture. Nazi Germany, Godless Communism, and Hamas come to mind. And we often must be asking ourselves questions about ingrained elements and structures of our society and culture that perpetrate and facilitate evil among us:

- the vulnerability of a free-market capital-based system to the ravages of greed and the unbridled pursuit of the almighty dollar;
- the embrace and honoring and enflaming of racial and ethnic divisions, among many others;
- our enthusiasm for war and violence as more necessary than evil;
- our growing tendency to demonize rather than listen to anyone who disagrees with us;
- our distrust of any individual or institution that does not heel to our preconceived views of the world; and

- our blindness or indifference in our lofty moralizing to the genuine misfortune and suffering of other human beings.

The point is, evil is so overwhelming it seems beyond our understanding and beyond our control.

If evil then is more than the sum of our individual sinful actions, then it must take more than the sum of our individual virtuous actions to take control of it and keep it at bay. And whether we see it as a demon or Satan or systemic evil, we understand that we alone are no match for it. So in the Gospel, as would be understood in the culture of his day, Jesus faces off against demons who possessed human beings and distorted and disordered their behavior and generally were thought to be beyond human control.

Yet Jesus did not attempt to cast out demons in ways typical to his times. He used no magic wand or words or incantations, no physical acts, hand signals, or gestures. No smoke. No mirrors. No illusions. No violence. He simply spoke with authority. That's all he needed to do. And that is so very important in understanding the message Mark intends to convey.

Because for Mark, evil may be the work of evil spirits and those evil spirits might be considered counterparts or rivals of the Holy Spirit, but they are nowhere close to equals of the Holy Spirit. Ultimate authority resides in Christ. And the evil spirits obey his commands. There is nothing magic about this. Evil in any iteration is subject to the authority of Christ.

It is no wonder then that we invoke God in Christ in praying for the ability to resist and overcome evil. And that is true whether we are talking about physical illness or mental illness or temptation or just about anything else that seems mysterious or beyond our control.

We know that alone as mere human beings we are no match for evil in any of its forms. What do we say in the Lord's Prayer? Lead us not into temptation. Or in the contemporary version, save us from the time of trial. Is it any wonder that well-known recovery programs insist on invoking one's higher power? Or that psychiatrist Gerald My devotes an entire book to God's grace as the only sure antidote to addiction.²

When we pray, as we will today, for the sick and afflicted, we acknowledge the authority of God in Christ over evil. We could just as easily leave it to the doctors and nurses and technicians and counselors and caseworkers who provide our healthcare when we are ill, physically or mentally, or fending off the ravages of addictive behavior. But in our prayers we acknowledge the Jesus of Mark's gospel.

We embrace the grace of God and the power of Christ over the evils of this world. We trust that our human efforts to comfort and heal will be amplified by the grace of God and sometimes in ways that remain as mysterious to us as notions of demons and evil spirits.

² Gerald May, M.D., *Addiction and Grace* (San Francisco; HarperSanFrancisco, 1998).

The effect of our prayers is no less real than the curing of Simon's mother-in-law or the silencing of the demons by Jesus. Because our prayers are founded on the pre-eminent authority of Christ. And that's what Mark wanted his readers to understand.

Archaeologists are nearly certain that they have located and excavated the home of Simon's mother-in-law.³ It is, therefore, one of the few locations where we can be certain that Jesus was actually present during his life.⁴ So my dear friends in Christ, to join with our presiding bishop's embrace of the immortal words of that eminent theologian Bobby McFerrin, "Don't worry. Be happy." Jesus is in the house.

³ Far less certainty exists about the story underlying *The Exorcist*. The theory that *The Exorcist* was based on an actual case of exorcism that took place in Mt. Ranier, Maryland, in the late 40s. An investigative journalist, however, largely debunked the story as fabricated and based on a case of a supposed exorcism in Cottage City, Maryland. But that case involved little, if any, of the behavior attributed to the possessed girl in *The Exorcist*. And much of which could be explained by natural circumstances and phenomena. "FAQ," *The Exorcist*, Imdb, http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0070047/faq?ref_=tt_faq_sm#.2.1.10 (accessed February 2, 2015).

⁴ M. Eugene Boring and Fred C. Craddock, "Mark," *The People's New Testament Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster John Know Press, 2004) 111.