

Sermon for January 28, 2018 "Who's Afraid of the Big Bad Devil?"

Mark 1:21-28

One Sabbath Jesus was preaching in the Synagogue. In the middle of the service a demon possessed man began making a commotion. "Have you come to destroy us Son of God," the man hollered. Jesus commanded, "Be silent and come out of that man." After a fit of convulsing the man returned to his right mind. The people were amazed at Jesus' authority and power. He commanded demons and they obeyed.

Isn't that a quaint little story from a primitive prescientific society? Sociologists will tell you that it perfectly reflects the world view of first century Palestine. In Jesus' day people believed in demons. They believed these demons inhabited dark and unclean places. If a person wasn't careful around dark shadowy and unclean places, a demon might pounce on them. These demons were believed to cause illnesses from blindness to epilepsy. Everything from plagues to mental illness was blamed on demons.

But people don't believe in demons any more. Science has shown us that many of the things blamed on demons in the past really have other causes. Epilepsy is most often caused by scar tissue on the brain. Plagues are caused by viruses and bacteria. Mental illness is caused by biochemical imbalances and dysfunctional patterns of relating to others. Science has freed us from that ancient world view which included demons. There must be a scientific explanation for what happened in that synagogue. Let's look at the evidence. The allegedly demon possessed man apparently suffered from a psychosis of some kind. He suffered from the delusion that he was possessed by a demon. He thought the Son of God was out to get him. Obviously, delusions of grandeur and persecution. So, you might ask, if he was deluded, then how did he know that Jesus was the Son of God? I am sure everyone in that synagogue suspected as much. They were talking about his authority and his teachings. In his deluded state this man had no inhibitions so he blurted out what others would barely admit to themselves. The miracle is that Jesus freed this man of his delusional psychosis with only a few words. It would take our best Psychologists years to do the same if they could.

We modern people don't believe in demons anymore. The last time you were sick you went to a doctor, right? You believe in the scientifically based treatments that modern medicine has devised. Maybe you asked a preacher or a friend to pray for you, but those prayers were probably that God would give wisdom and guidance to the doctors, right? How can we believe in demons if we don't even believe in the Devil? 59% of Christians don't believe in the devil according to a recent survey. (*George Barna*) Science has freed us from such beliefs.

I am a product of this 21st century scientific world view. I believe there is an explanation for everything and that empirical research is one of the best ways to study and understand our world. My undergraduate degree is in Psychology. One of my hobbies and areas of interest is astronomy. And I believe in demons! Yes, you heard me right. I believe in demons. Before you hypothesize that I am suffering from a delusional psychosis, hear me out.

I believe in demons because of the empirical evidence. In ancient societies people avoided darkness and protected their homes against demons. Today people avoid dark places and protect their homes against the evils of crime and violence. The results are the same: fear, even terror, that robs one of a good quality of life. In ancient societies people believed they were possessed by demons that took them over making their lives a living hell. Today people are possessed by desires, lusts and addictions. The end result is the same: something else seems in control and makes life unbearable.

The empirically verifiable evidence is irrefutable. Forces of evil exist and are out there. Now I don't believe in little green, gremlin-like creatures that crouch in dark and unclean places waiting to pounce on unsuspecting passersby. But I do believe in evil that can take over people's lives. These demons are the fears, anxieties and appetites that crouch in the dark places of people's hearts and souls. They are the demonic evil forces that cause things like racial violence and domestic abuse. They are the tempters that entice people to throw their lives and souls away for money, sex or drugs.

Evil demonic forces exist! They may not take the form of little red devils. But they do take form in the evil and sin in our world. And these evil forces can possess and work through people.

But the existence of demons is not what our Bible passage is about. The Bible assumes their existence and doesn't spend time trying to prove that they are. The Bible is more concerned with other matters. For instance: "Who is Jesus and what is he doing?"

The real issue in Mark 1:21-28 is the authority of Christ. It opens with the people being astounded at the way Jesus teaches. He doesn't teach like the scribes. They are always saying "Rabbi so and so said this," or "The prophets said that." Even the prophets said, "Thus says the Lord." Jesus just says what he says as if his word should be enough to believe it.

Some people were offended and said, "Who does this carpenter think he is and what is he doing?" It was a demon who answered that question. What did the demon say? "Have you come to destroy us Son of God?" That's the answer! Jesus is the Son of God. That is why he can speak with such authority. And Jesus has come with power to banish and destroy the forces of evil.

Here is the real point of this event: Jesus Christ has power and authority to banish evil from our lives! Repeat after me: "Jesus Christ - has power and authority - to banish evil - from my life."

Imagine, if you will, the forces of evil gathered before us. There is Violent Crime making people cower for fear behind bolted doors. There is Drug Addiction dragging her victims around in chains. Here is Domestic Violence abusing those closest to him. Here are depression, anxiety, and fear terrorizing. And here are Racism, Sexism, Prejudice, Ignorance, Materialism, Me-ism, and all the other evils that invade our lives.

Scary bunch aren't they? Maybe if we close our eyes they will go away. (Close and cover eyes for a few seconds.) No, that doesn't work. They are too real to just ignore. Maybe we can run from them. But that won't work either. Escapism is waiting to take us if we try. We can't defeat them ourselves. We don't have the strength or ability to defeat even Poverty. Even if our whole country declared war on one of these demons, the others would fight against us. We can't defeat even one of them.

But Jesus can! He came to destroy evil, and evil knows it. Because of Jesus' arrival, its doom is sure. Christ has the authority and power to tell evil where to go.

Do you remember the Walt Disney adaptation of the three little pigs? In one scene the pigs dance around singing "Who's afraid of the big bad wolf, the big bad wolf, the big bad wolf." If you remember the story, two of them were unafraid because they had underestimated the Wolf's power. They ignored the scientific data that demonstrated that huts of straw and sticks were not strong enough to withstand a category 4 wolf. But one of the pigs sang the song because he knew the Wolf's power and knew the strength of bricks to overcome it.

Well "Who's afraid of the big bad Devil?" Don't ignore the power of evil in our world. Whether you believe the Devil is an actual entity or just a metaphor for evil. Just look around you at what is happening in our world. Evil is real. But know this: Christ is able to overpower and defeat that evil.

Jesus was in a synagogue and cast a demon out of a man. Jesus is here. Are there any evil forces in your life? Any evil that causes fear and anxiety or even threatens to take over your life. Jesus is the Son of God and before something inside you rises up and asks the question, I will answer, "Yes, he is here to destroy the demons."