

CHRIST AGAINST THE DEMONS

A sermon by Dr. David Palmer, United Methodist Church of Kent, April 10, 2016

Based on Mark 1:21-27, Matt. 17:14-18, Mark 5:2-17, II Cor. 4:6-7

The sermon this morning is a continuation of a five-part sermon series entitled, “Christ versus the Powers of Evil.” Last Sunday, we considered the whole idea that there are dark spiritual powers at work in the world. We looked at a key Biblical text in Paul’s letter to the Ephesians, where he sums up our situation by saying, “Our struggle is not against enemies of flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.” (Ephesians 6:12) We noted that the description of “cosmic powers of this present darkness” and “spiritual forces of evil” well describes what we are experiencing now in radical Islamist terrorism, where we are dealing not just with a few bad people but with a force of spiritual evil that is sweeping our world.

We also noted that people through the centuries have conceived of the dark powers in various ways. In the first century, people generally thought of the dark powers as evil spirits—personal spiritual entities that were at work for ill. In the last century, theologians have more typically seen the dark powers as impersonal forces of evil which arise out of collective human sinfulness. Prime examples have been the Nazi movement in Germany, totalitarian Communist movements such as in Cambodia, and the radical Islamist movement today. In each case, the hatred, the rage, and the desire for power and glory by a whole group of people brings forth an overarching power of evil which captivates yet more people and leads finally to mass destruction. But whether you conceive of the dark powers as personal entities or impersonal forces, the bottom line is: they are real. There are forces of evil at work in our world; and as Christians, we need to know how to withstand those forces and how finally to triumph over them.

Let us begin with a moment of prayer . . .

In the gospel stories, Jesus appears in many occasions as healer; and there are two main types of healing stories. Jesus performs amazing physical healings—as he heals the blind and the lame and even lepers—and Jesus performs spiritual healings, as he casts out demons.

We heard three of those stories in our gospel readings this morning. Often today people do not quite know what to make of the gospel stories about demons, and so what people typically do with those stories is ignore them. But the gospels are full of stories about Jesus against the demons; for in fact these stories are telling us something of central importance. The stories proclaim that Jesus has the power to deliver us from forces of evil that would tear at our soul.

Our problem with these stories, of course, is that they are expressed in first century language and thought forms. For most of us, our only exposure to demons is in weird scary movies, like *The Exorcist*, now a classic, and many such movies since. Or we

see the supposed casting out of demons performed by questionable religious actors like Earnest Angley. How are we really supposed to be thinking about demons and the casting out of demons today?

A key to that question is given to us by the apostle Paul in the passage we heard from II Corinthians. Paul was talking about how God has revealed God's truth to human beings; and he said, "It is the God who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be clear that extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us." (II Cor. 4:6-7) In other words, God throughout the Biblical story proclaims the light of God's truth, and that truth is then received and held in clay jars, namely, in human beings who are fragile and impermanent. The clay jar will be imperfect and will eventually crumble, but the light of God's truth continues.

When it comes, therefore, to Biblical writings, the writers of the gospels receive the truth of Jesus, and they then tell the story using their language (in this case Greek) and their thought forms. Their first century language and first century thought forms are the clay jars—the vessels that hold the eternal truths of Jesus. The language fades away—no one speaks koine Greek, the Greek of the first century, any more—and the thought forms of the first century, a prescientific world, fade away; but the light and truth of Jesus abide.

So when reading the Bible, we do not need to carry forward the first century language—we don't have to read ancient Greek, although scholars will use Greek to help us understand some of the meanings of passages—and especially we don't have to carry forward the thought forms of the first century. In the first century, people thought of any kind of mental or emotional malady or even some physical illnesses as demon possession. If you were schizophrenic, you were considered to be demon possessed. If you had epilepsy, like the boy in the one gospel story, you were considered to be demon possessed—since an epileptic attack sure looks like some demon has taken over your body. If you had an anxiety disorder, you were considered to be demon possessed. Demon possession was the way that first century people described any sort of malady that affected the mind. The healing of the malady was then described as the casting out of the demon.

The first century concept of demon possession was thus the clay jar—the imperfect, impermanent human thought form that received the light of God's truth. The clay jar crumbles—we have long since left behind first century ideas about demon possession, and we can safely leave those ideas behind. What we need to carry forward is the eternal truth of God that was proclaimed within those ancient stories about demons.

At the heart of all the stories of demon possession is an abiding spiritual reality—there are negative spiritual forces that regularly afflict the human mind and soul. There

are fears and anxieties that gnaw at us, there are sorrows and feelings of guilt that weigh on us, there are temptations that pull at us, there are doubts that cloud our vision. Whatever you think about demons, if you are afflicted with persistent fears or regrets or temptations or doubts, it feels as though there is a demon inside you shooting arrows into your heart.

When you have a physical illness, there are all sorts of medications and treatments you can use, and still the road to healing can be a long journey. When you have a malady of the mind, an ailment of the soul, it can be yet more difficult to find healing. This is a recurring element in all the gospel stories about people who are described as demon possessed—they feel themselves to be in the grip of an evil force, and they cannot free themselves from it.

In each case, the gospels say, “Jesus rebuked the demon, and it came out of the person.” [Mark 1:25, Matthew 17:18], or Jesus simply says, “Come out of him, you unclean spirit!” [Mark 5:8] Jesus speaks to his audience in the language of his day—he uses the idioms and the thoughts forms of his audience; since they think, and describe their own ailments, in terms of demon possession, he is going to talk to them and act for their healing in those terms, and thus he commands the demons to come out. What astonishes the crowd everywhere is that Jesus has power over these demonic forces; as it is reported in the gospel of Mark, “They were all amazed, saying, “What is this? He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey.” (Mark 1:27)

The message is clear, and it completely transcends the idioms or thought forms of any age. The message is that Christ can free us from any negative spiritual force that has a grip on our soul.

Today we don't generally think in terms of demon possession, but we still can have a very analogous experience—whenever something negative has a hold on your mind. It may be a worry or a regret that you cannot shake. It may be a feeling of anger or bitterness or resentment that you just can't get past. It may be some fixation that just keeps dominating your thinking. It is a common experience in life, that people may find themselves in the grip of some very negative feeling or attitude or mindset, and cannot seem to free themselves from it.

We are clay vessels; we are imperfect and fraught with weakness. But “the extraordinary power belongs to God” [II Cor. 4:7]; and that power can be at work in us through Jesus Christ. Christ casts out the demons today—Christ can free us from all the negative stuff that has a grip on our mind and soul, from all that would weigh us down. In the story about the man who lived among the tombs, it is said after the healing that the man was now “in his right mind.” (Mark 5:15) This is what Christ does—Christ brings us to our right mind; Christ brings us to a wholeness of spirit, so that we have the right perspective and the right outlook on life, and so that we can live then in good and positive ways.

All this has implications as well for the larger demonic powers that afflict our world as a whole. Last week we talked about the demonic spirit that we are seeing in radical Islamism today. If there was ever an example of people who are not in their right mind, it is terrorists, who are completely in the grip of a spirit of rage and hatred, and who are totally fixated on a very warped vision of glory. In the gospel stories, one of the common characteristics of chronically demon-possessed people was that they were violent and scary, like the man living among the tombs. But Jesus is not intimidated. The power of Christ far transcends any negative force in the world.

So we can have confidence today that no matter how frightful the demonic powers may appear in our world at large, the power of Christ will ultimately triumph over every evil. But there is another factor in the equation, which affects how readily the power of Christ can take hold in particular human lives. In the story about the demoniac among the tombs, you would think that when Jesus healed the man, the townspeople would have rejoiced, both because there was no longer a wild man in the cemetery, and even more because this poor man had been healed. But at the end of the story, they were not happy, and asked Jesus to leave their neighborhood. [*The people began to beg Jesus to leave their neighborhood. Mark 5:17*] Why?

It all had to do with the pigs. In the process of Jesus healing the man, a large herd of pigs went tumbling over a cliff and drowned in the sea. You can see the place where this happened to this day. Along the northeastern shore of the Sea of Galilee there are steep high slopes running down to the lake. Modern commentators suggest that in all the commotion of the demoniac encountering Jesus, the herd was spooked and bolted and went over the edge. The interpretation given in the gospel account, of course, is in the language and thinking of that day—with the idea that the evil spirits came out of the man and went into the pigs. But the townspeople were not worried about theological interpretations of the event. For them, there was one bottom line: they owned the pigs, and they were not pleased that they had just suffered a major financial loss.

So the Savior of the world was among them—indeed marvelously among them, for they were all Gentiles, as they owned pigs. But they sent him away, because they were worried about their bank accounts.

It is our human sinfulness that hampers us from fully experiencing the power of Christ. This is true on a personal level—we cannot experience the saving power of Christ if we just persist in self-centered values and goals and push Jesus away. And it is also true on a global scale. When Islamist terrorists strike, one reaction, seen in many places in the West, is for people to hate all Muslims; but we cannot experience the saving action of Christ if we persist in fear and hate.

The answer, on every level, is to open ourselves to the presence and the power of Christ. The good news is that though we are sinners, Christ brings forgiveness. As we turn to Christ in faith, Christ restores us to harmony with God, and Christ works then within us with transforming power, so that we can be lifted up and enabled to live as

God's people. We overcome the powers of evil as we share in the grace and love of Christ; for then Christ can cast out the demons from our own lives, and we can be a part of how Christ is at work to cast out the demons from our world.