

There's nothing quite like a demon possession to make you sit up and take notice. I might have seen one on the corner of Ponce and Monroe the other day. A man was standing there shouting obscenities. That alone doesn't make it qualify as a demon possession - there are times when shouting obscenities at that intersection seems reasonable to me, but it sure seemed like it. He was, in my brother's words, "responding to internal stimuli". Living, as we do, in an urban area, it normally doesn't phase me but this time I noticed as his behavior became increasingly menacing and my car door was unlocked. Locking car doors isn't something I think much about, but I had opened the door to pour out the last of my cold coffee shortly before and didn't think to lock it back. So I pulled up to the intersection and became extremely aware that my doors were unlocked. I instinctively reached for the center console to the little button on the dash that would lock the car doors. Just then, he made eye-contact. It seemed to me rude at best and incendiary at worst to lock the doors just then, so I just held my finger over the button, not locking, waiting, waiting, waiting for the light to change. Finally, I sped away and quickly locked my doors before the next light. As I thought about this story, it struck me this is some of what separates us from the Biblical text: rather than walking past our demon-possessed neighbors, we can drive by quickly, and if we are stopped at a traffic light, our car doors have automatically locked before we ever left our driveways. But...that doesn't change the fact that there are troubled people among us, deeply troubled, as deeply troubled now as they were a couple of thousand years ago. And our relative insulation against them, cars and door locks, only serves to highlight further the

division that exists between the whole and the not whole. The division is still there, maybe worse.

Furthermore, we are separated from this story by even another layer of insulation: we are children of the scientific age. We understand germ theory and we have a Diagnostic and Statistical Manual, if we want one, that will give us words to describe demon possession, words like epilepsy and schizophrenia, among others. We don't think about physical ailment the way that folks did in Jesus' age. But that doesn't make demon possession any less real, any less horrible. We just use different words to describe it.

Perhaps that is a point we should consider for a moment. What is a demon possession? Does it mean that there is a senior demon directing the junior demons a la C.S. Lewis' Screwtape Letters to wreak havoc in the world while standing back in glee while the demonic forces oppress and destroy God's good creation? Certainly there are those who think so, but I don't think we should be too tied to that understanding. It is sufficient simply to acknowledge that there are destructive forces loose in the world with catastrophic consequences. This knowledge alone is enough to let us step into this tale. At it's heart, this is an age old story. We could so easily change the names and circumstances in it and it would come right up to the present day.

It would be easy to apply a psychological interpretation to the biblical issue of demon possession. We could so conceptualize the matter that it doesn't say a word to our lives anymore. But let's not do that.

The biblical concept of demon possession is more than superstitious people assigning theological meaning to mental illness. The biblical witness is clear that demon possession, as we encounter it in our text this morning, is a pitched battle against the

forces of chaos and evil that would threaten to overwhelm us. And what's more, it is *not* limited to Biblical times. Comfortably insulated against any interpretation that would flirt with the phantasmagoric, we could miss the point of this text.

It is clear that, for the Gospel authors, the demonic is the result of sin, not just little sins, but *sin*.

And we are all under the weight of sin.

Or perhaps I can make this more clear with the words of one of my colleagues and seminary classmates, "What makes you think you ain't got demons?"

What makes you think you ain't got demons? Have you ever encountered something so completely unresponsive to reason and rationale that it can't be described as anything other than demonic? I remember vividly the first time anyone ever trusted me with anything resembling pastoral confidence. A woman was struggling with her brother, had in fact, been struggling for years with him because he wouldn't, probably couldn't change. In her words, "He's just so damn hardheaded that he won't see that he is going to self-destruct. He's already serving five to ten in the Texas state pen, and he's in a gang there. I don't know how this will ever end." Or another time, and I was so outclassed I had almost nothing to say, in another church a father approached me asking for prayer, because he said, "I am so scared on my son's behalf because of his addiction to crack that I have been reduced to bargaining with God. I'm forty-nine years old and I'm bargaining with God like I'm a twelve year old and I don't want my mother to find out I broke the cookie jar, will you please pray for me?"

Friends, I guess what I'm saying at this point is that no matter how we might want to see it, it is clear that there are forces beyond our control. It would be simplistic, and

dangerously easy to label that which we don't understand or that scares us as demonic, but it would be equally foolish and irresponsible reading of scripture to stick our heads in the sand and pretend that since we can't define it, it doesn't exist. There are such things as evil and chaos and oftentimes they are beyond our control.

Because when we realize that we can't control everything, this story has something to say to us. But to these demonic choruses, the gospel speaks a word of hope and salvation that is both wonderful and fearful at the same time. To the forces of chaos and evil personified in the demon possession of this man from Gerasa, the gospel says: your suffering is ended, God is in control of even the dark recesses of the psyche and is acting in the present tense to redeem you.

In The Way of Jesus Christ, German theologian Jurgen Moltmann puts it this way:

“The lordship of God drives out of creation the powers of destruction, which are demons and idols, and heals the created beings who have been damaged by them. If the kingdom of God is coming as Jesus proclaimed, then salvation is coming as well. If salvation comes to the whole creation, then the health of all created beings is the result – health of body, and soul, individual and community, human beings and nature.”¹

Jesus has power to save!

In *Luke*, this story appears just after Jesus stills an instant storm out on the sea of Galilee. The disciples cower in fear against the powers of nature that threaten to overwhelm them, saying, “we are perishing, do you not care?” As they cower, Jesus confronts the powers that threaten destruction and stills the storm and calms the sea.

Now just so we don't miss it, the sea is a poetic motif in biblical literature: it is more than just water. The sea represents all that is fearful, chaotic and demonic. In the creation

¹ Moltmann, Jurgen. The Way of Jesus Christ: Christology in Messianic Dimensions. P104

story, God separates the dry land from the sea above and the sea below, setting out a place of order in the midst of the chaos where humanity understands that God is in charge. Of course, that order lasts only a brief time before sin enters and begins to unravel the whole creation, and when Jesus stands and calls out the forces of evil, he is declaring God's reign, his Lordship over the powers of sin. At its heart, this story is a simple retelling of the whole Gospel: Jesus has the power to save and redeem.

But there's more: at the end of this chapter and the beginning of the next, in Luke, Jesus sends out – not the apostles, but the disciples (that's you and me) get this, *with the power to cast out demons themselves*. And that, friends, is where this story gets really scary.

Recently, a friend of mine called me with a harrowing story. It seems that in the town home community where he lives, in a pretty nice section of town, actually, there was a break in during the night. A thief broke in through the backdoor of the house, walked through the house where the owner, a young woman, was sleeping upstairs, stole her car keys, went out the front door and stole her car, making enough noise to wake her in the process.

A few days later, I went to my friend's house, and when I got out of the car, the young woman, whom I've met a few times before but do not know well, was standing outside talking with neighbors. She approached me asking, "Do you know someone, could you tell me someone who could bless my house? It just doesn't feel right in there. It hasn't felt right since the night that person broke into it."

Now, house blessings are not unusual. They aren't a prominent part of our tradition, but they are not unwelcome in it. At first I was petrified that in fact, she was asking me to perform an exorcism on her house, which, incidentally, does not have a liturgy in our

Book of Common Worship. But in time, I came to realize that there was something deeper in her question. What she seemed to be asking was this, “Does God have the power to restore order where chaos had broken in, to restore confidence where fear has overwhelmed?”

The answer to that question is yes... but perhaps in unexpected ways.

Paul puts it a little differently. He tells us that in Christ, God is making a new creation, casting out the powers of sin and evil and replacing them with Shalom, the peaceable existence that God wills for us. In Christ, Paul tells us, God was reconciling the world to God’s very own self and entrusting us with the ministry of reconciliation. Or as Luke puts it, the disciples were sent out with the power to cast out demons.

It would be patently impossible for me, or any minister, or really any Christian, to create a template of what that looks like. We’re making it up as we go, in the power of the Spirit.

That is not always easy. It usually isn’t, if we take it seriously. But it remains our calling as Christians, our joyful response to the Word of God that we have been saved.

David Buttrick tells this story:

“A few years ago a multimillion dollar church was built in an eastern city, “New England Colonial,” of course. The day of dedication had been set, but not all the furnishings had arrived. The chancel was empty. No pulpit or table, no tapestry for the back wall. When worshippers gathered for the dedication, they found that someone had snuck into the building at night, and with a wide brush, had painted in big black letters on the bare wall, ‘stop the killing, feed the poor, Sincerely yours, Jesus Christ.’

Well,” Buttrick concludes, “do you sense our strange calling in a blasé world, in a world that will go along with anything for a tank full of gas and an I.R.A.? Somehow we are called to speak, to shake awake God’s people with the strong words of Christ.”²

Truly we are making it up as we go along, and not all of us are called to exorcise demons in a way that is reminiscent of Jesus’ dramatic casting out of the legion of demons. In fact, most of us won’t, because we aren’t Jesus. We are his followers, flawed, broken, and sometimes the demons are legion. But that doesn’t mean that we have nothing to do. We have the hope of the gospel to share.

One last story. A while back on Easter Sunday, I walked into my office after church and found a man sitting in one of the chairs with members of the congregation attending to him. It was Easter, and this poor man, dehydrated, disoriented and alone, possessed by the demonic powers of hunger, thirst and God only knows what else had wandered into the church. He needed Jesus Christ and so someone brought him peanut butter crackers and fresh water, and another member left the family eating Easter lunch to take him to the hospital and then to the shelter.

Who did this and when? I’ll never tell. I just know that it was the reconciling work of Jesus Christ. And it was a sure a sign of the people of God casting out demons as I have ever seen.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, Amen.

² Buttrick David. *Up Against the Powers that Be* in [A Chorus of Witnesses](#). Long and Plantinga, eds. P224.