

Jesus Confronts the Demons

Sermon: January 28, 2018

St. Peter's Cathedral in Helena, Montana

Lectionary: Deuteronomy 18:15-20

Psalm 111

I Corinthians 8:1-13

Mark 1:21-28

In the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen

Good morning.

We are now well into the season of Epiphany as we move through the first chapter of Mark's gospel. Jesus has been baptized, he has been tested in the wilderness, he has called his first disciples and now he enters the synagogue in Capernaum. He teaches on the sabbath, impressing his listeners as one who spoke with authority. Then he is confronted by a man with an unclean spirit.

I title this sermon: 'Jesus Confronts the Demons'.

One of the most important aspects of this story is that it is the people with unclean spirits who first recognize him. It is not the 'normal people' or the 'conventional' people who recognize Jesus but those who are sick, in this case possessed by demons. The Gospel of Mark has another major theme which is 'the misunderstanding of the disciples'. Jesus does something and his followers simply don't get it. He teaches and they misunderstand. He heals and they are told not to tell anyone. It is those possessed by demons who are the first to know his power to heal. They know enough to be afraid of him, because he is more powerful than they.

Jesus is not intimidated. He is not afraid. He knows exactly what is going on and what he was sent to do, which is to confront the works of God's enemies, to defeat the power of evil and to complete his mission of being victorious over the author of sin and death. A number of times, Jesus will confront those who are possessed with demons and his final victory on the cross will be the ultimate confrontation with the enemy of God.

Now before I go any further, it is probably wise to slow down and address a popular modern prejudice, which is a disbelief in the existence of demons and a disbelief in the existence of a devil, or Satan or any enemy of God. Certainly, our secular society disbelieves in the existence of Satan dismissing such language as medieval nonsense which human beings in their higher wisdom have graduated from and have risen above!

But on the other hand, how could anyone with basic common sense think that there is no evil in the world. How else do we call the countless instances of evil things that humanity has done to other human beings? What about the evil of

slavery or the millions of deaths in two world wars in the last century, or the holocaust, or the purges and terror in the Soviet Union and China, or the terrorism in the early years of this century?

The well-known English writer and theologian, C.S. Lewis wrote a famous book on the devil and his minions in the middle of the last century called "The Screwtape Letters". It was a series of short letters from a senior demon named Screwtape to a junior demon named Wormwood on how to discourage a new Christian from progressing in his faith.

Lewis begins his little book with two warnings about the devil. The first is to avoid the temptation to disbelieve in his existence. The other extreme is to have too much interest in the devil. The devil would love for us to disbelieve in his existence. That way he could work in secret without being challenged. On the other hand, to maintain a constant interest may distract us from paying attention to other important things!

The devil is the enemy of God who, as we say in our baptismal creed, is out to 'corrupt and destroy the creatures of God'. This is what is going on in the soul of the person Jesus confronts in the synagogue. Just as Jesus was tested in the wilderness by God's enemy who wanted to destroy his vocation, so he tries to tempt us into a life where we become so much less than the human beings we were created to be.

One of my favorite letters in C. S. Lewis' book "The Screwtape Letters" involves a young Christian who is at the British museum studying the scripture. He is excited about his new faith and the new life he has discovered and wants to progress in his faith. He is about to make some progress in understanding some aspect of the faith. The advice of the senior demon Screwtape to the junior demon, Wormwood, is not to attack the new Christian directly, because that might be so obvious that it would fail. Screwtape does not advise his pupil to try to correct or confront the new Christian. Instead, he advises that he use simple distraction! Suggest to the new Christian that he must be tired from all of that concentration and that it is probably time to take a lunch break! The hope of both demons is that after a lunch break there will be so many other distractions that the new Christian will forget what he was concentrating on and fail to progress in his faith.

Jesus' confrontation with a man with an unclean spirit signals the central mission of his ministry, which is to heal those who were afflicted with demons and finally to defeat God's enemy on the cross.

I suspect that if I were to ask you right now whether any of you have ever experienced demons in your own life, a good number of you would say yes. I certainly have. I am sure that a good number of my demons continue to distract me because of a lack of forgiveness, a lack of my not forgiving someone who has hurt me or a lack of asking God to forgive me for ways I know I have hurt people.

What is clear from the ministry of Jesus is that he brought a ministry of forgiveness because he knew that forgiveness was central to restoring broken, unhealed relationships.

What does the devil try to do to us with his demons? What are some of his tactics?

We have already mentioned one of the devil's main tactics, which is simply to distract us from doing the things God would want for us to do. Distraction is a main tactic.

A second tactic of the devil is to get us to hurt ourselves. We could call this tactic self-infliction. We know this from a famous healing Jesus performs for a man in chapter five of Mark who calls himself 'Legion' meaning many, because he is possessed by many demons. Legion is described as 'cutting himself', a behavior which goes on to this day among many young people. A major tactic of the devil is self-infliction.

A third tactic of the devil is to convince ourselves that we can never be forgiven for our sins. Forgiveness was the central gift Jesus came to bring all of us, in order to free us from the consequences of our sins and the consequences of people hurting us. The devil is out to destroy God's creatures by burdening them with unforgiven guilt and putting them in bondage. Guilt turns us inward. It turns us inward on ourselves instead of outward toward others. Jesus came to free us from guilt, and to turn us from undue self-concern to a life of loving concern for others.

Jesus came to forgive so that we could heal our broken relationships. The demons are sent to convince us of the lie that broken relationships cannot be healed. The devil is a liar. Jesus love is more powerful than the devil's lies.

Jesus healed the man with an unclean spirit by rebuking what afflicted him saying, "Be silent and come out of him!" And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with an unclean spirit, came out of him.

Jesus came to heal, not to inflict pain. That was his enemy's mission not his own. What he did to the man in the synagogue he continues to do for us today. If we have demons which afflict us today, may we hand them over to the one God who has the power to forgive, so that we are free to live in the path of God's purpose and free to love others in the vocation to which we have been called. Amen

The Very Rev. Graham Smith