

“Challenging Evil in Jesus’ Strong Name”

Mark 1:21–28

Dr. Christopher C. F. Chapman

First Baptist Church, Raleigh

January 31, 2021

We have a tendency to ignore or dismiss exorcism stories, even if they are found in the Bible. They just don’t fit our worldview. We don’t believe in demons — though there have been times I have been tempted to believe, like when an organ ciphher sounded just as we sang Martin Luther’s great text, “And though this world, with devils filled...” But we don’t really believe in demons and thus, we don’t believe exorcism stories, at least not as they are told. In today’s reading from Mark, perhaps the man who is said to have an unclean spirit simply has epilepsy — he experiences a convulsion — they just don’t know what that is. Demonology is a dated discipline, and most often when people use demon language today, they do so to manipulate others.

An essay in the Winter 2020 issue of the journal *Image* entitled “Facts and Lies” illustrates this practice. The author, Claire Latimer-Dennis, a Canadian minister who received her MDiv from Duke Divinity School, describes a number of ways people have claimed to have an insight from God for her — some of them true, some not. A friend praying for her at a retreat said she envisioned her as a white rabbit hopping through snow. She might feel invisible, but she was still forging a path. That felt like a word from God. When she was seventeen and wanted to stay in England, a friend praying for her said, “God sees your faithfulness... God sees your heart, and is going to make a way for you to stay in England.” That felt reassuring, but she was not able to stay.

Then, the author describes an interaction with the director of a ministry she worked for in which he told her about demons, including the mermaid spirit of seduction, common mostly in women and gay men; the Queen of Heaven, connected to Marian devotion, who leads a person to question God’s authority; and the Angel of Light, the demon of false rationality who causes you to mistrust the spiritual authority of

leaders. The leader asked if he could pray for her to be delivered from this last demon, the one that was obviously plaguing her, since she questioned his wisdom! It has a certain appeal. If you disagree with my insight and spiritual guidance, I can simply say that you have a demon!

But all kidding aside, we just don't believe in demons nor are we vulnerable to people who try to manipulate us with such outdated thinking. The problem is demons and exorcisms are at the heart of a number of biblical stories, including today's reading from Mark. Furthermore, while there may not be a place for literal demons in a modern or postmodern worldview, we do still believe in the broader concepts of good and evil. There is more to life than we see on the surface of things or even through the most powerful microscope or telescope. Some of us may be like the younger Han Solo who says he has never seen any evidence of an all-powerful Force, but most of us are more like the older Han who grudgingly acknowledges the Force.

In fact, the popularity in literature and film of stories which explore the struggle between good and evil — like Star Wars, Lord of the Rings, Harry Potter — points to the fact that we still believe in such things. Real life points to their existence. Sometimes we can attribute suffering to the consequences of human actions, but other times — as with the Holocaust of Nazi Germany, the genocide of Soviet Siberia, the horrors of Apartheid South Africa, the history of slavery here — it seems like there is something more than human action involved, something evil on a grand scale, something demonic, if not a personal devil.

So, perhaps there is something in these stories of exorcism that we ought not ignore, dismiss or interpret away. If there is evil in the world, not just good and bad but evil, we need to find a way to address it.

The first step lies in acknowledging evil's existence, naming our demons, if you will. We cannot address something we refuse to recognize. This doesn't seem to be a problem in the story from Mark 1. Jesus is teaching in the synagogue in Capernaum, in a way people find compelling. We tend to focus on this part of the story because it is significant. Teaching lies at the heart of Jesus' ministry. But we also

focus on the teaching so that we can avoid the next part of the story which is also significant, the part about exorcism.

Mark notes that a man with an unclean spirit is there in the synagogue, and the spirit cries out, “What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God (this last phrase being the way Elisha is described in 2 Kings 4:9).” There doesn’t seem to be much question that this unclean spirit or demon is there. Jesus hears the spirit’s voice and responds, telling it to be quiet and rebuking it. He ultimately casts it out of the man, we will get to that, but for now, it is important to note that Jesus openly acknowledges the existence of this evil life force.

This is the first step in meeting any challenge, acknowledging its existence, naming it for what it is. Thus, this is the first step in regard to challenging evil. We might begin with cultural evil. What do we see in our world that needs to be named?

Racism is at the top of the list. There are thoughts and behaviors we learn as children that we can unlearn — like that certain others are inferior. But centuries of practice have embedded these habits into systems and structures such that we don’t realize they are controlling us. There is something more than human involved here, something spiritual, something evil, that has to be named for what it is. How else can we view the story Andy Manis told a couple of weeks ago about a black man in Georgia who was lynched in the late nineteenth century on December 25? Some white men celebrated the birth of Jesus by killing a black man. What word other than “evil” explains that?

Certain manifestations of division also seem to have taken on a demonic dimension. I am not talking about the differences themselves nor even many of the people who get caught up in extreme movements and behavior — like the mob action against our national Capitol on Inauguration Day at one end of the ideological spectrum and the reckless vandalism of Antifa in Portland and Seattle at the other end. But beyond the individuals (some of whom are deeply troubled) and the reasonable differences of opinion (not outright denial of facts), there is something at work tapping into the worst of human nature, using modern technologies like social media to distort reality and intensify fear such that a

manageable challenge is transformed into a raging crisis. We may differ on what we call it, but evil or demonic seems appropriate.

And there are other cultural realities that seem to reveal more than the addition of known parts — the prevalence of addiction, the re-emergence of human trafficking, the hatred of the other that moves beyond patriotism to jingoism, the greed that makes poverty not only possible but inevitable. We can explain these realities to some extent and thus address them in certain ways — establish rehab programs, enforce certain laws, bring together people from different nationalities, create better jobs for all. But until we recognize the spiritual dimensions of these concerns, we will never fully resolve the problems.

The same can be said of our personal demons. They have to be named before they can be addressed. Pride, greed, lust, envy, gluttony, anger, sloth — the seven deadly sins, first enumerated by Pope Gregory I in the sixth century, are a good place to begin. But there are other demons that plague us, on the one hand human frailties that can be explained and thus confronted, but on the other, at least at times, frailties that are exploited by something more than we can explain. The world can seem random at times, but it can also seem worse than random because sometimes it is, sometimes evil seems to attack us or those we love at our weakest place. When it does, we have to name it.

Once we have named our demons, we need to address them, but not alone. The hymnwriter refers to challenging evil in Jesus' strong name. That is a good way to think about it. In the reading from Mark, Jesus doesn't just recognize the unclean spirit; he tells it to be silent, rebukes it, and then casts it out of the man so that he can return to a normal life. How does he do this? Does Jesus have some power that we do not? Perhaps, but that would mean he is not really like us.

Perhaps another story can provide insight. In the ninth chapter of Mark, when Jesus comes down from the Mount of Transfiguration, he comes upon a man whose son is controlled by a spirit that will not allow him to speak. He has asked the disciples to cast out the spirit and thus make the son well, but they have been unable to do it. Jesus laments the lack of faith in his time and then casts out the spirit and makes the son

well. “Why could we not cast it out?” the disciples ask. “This kind can only come out through prayer,” Jesus says (Mark 9:14-29).

Prayer is the key, he says, but not just saying a few words before we act, asking God to do what we want. He is talking about the kind of intimate conversation with and connection to God he pursues every moment of his life. This is what enables him to confront evil so effectively, this is why he teaches and heals with power — because it is not just him acting but God acting in and through him. The implication for us seems clear. If we are to challenge evil — cultural evil or personal evil — we need to make sure we are not acting alone but rather are grounded in the Source of all goodness and love.

My Old Testament professor Page Kelley told a story about a native Alaskan who saw an electric lamp in a store for the first time. He bought one and took it home, waited for darkness, and then flipped the switch. Nothing happened because his home did not yet have electricity (*Interpreting Isaiah*, pp. 49-50). Seeking to confront the evils of racism, division, addiction or human trafficking alone, or to confront our own demons of pride and greed without God’s help, is like trying to get a light to turn on without electricity. We need to be connected to our Source of power to effect any change in the world, and sometimes just to retain hope that there is something we can do.

In his book *Binding the Strong Man*, Ched Myers says praying is not pious resignation to God’s will or an escape from responsibility but an “intensely personal struggle within each disciple, and among us collectively, to resist the despair and distractions that cause us to practice unbelief, to abandon or avoid the way of Jesus (p. 142).” Prayer is an act of faith, a persistent struggle to retain hope, to believe that change can happen. If we believe, and if we ground our efforts in God’s mercy and strength, we can challenge evil in Jesus’ strong name.

We have challenged racism this year with our presence at rallies and prayer vigils, our studies of the history of race, our partnerships with sisters and brothers of color, our banners expressing solidarity, our genuine heartache and tears. We have challenged division by building and maintaining relationships with people we disagree with, by refusing to caricature the other, by refusing the temptation to hate, even those

who seem to hate us. We have challenged various forms of addiction by providing space for support groups, education, and friendship to those who struggle. And we have done all of this not by ourselves but with each other and with God's guidance and strength.

Challenging personal demons works the same way. We have to name our demons, and then, we have to challenge them, but not alone.

In C. S. Lewis' novel *The Great Divorce* there is a character who is trying to make it to the mountains, which are a symbol of heaven. One thing holds him back — a little, red lizard that sits on his shoulder, twitching its tail and whispering into his ear. He wants to make it to mountains and he knows the lizard is the one thing holding him back, but he has grown accustomed to the creature and it pleads its case incessantly.

An angel offers to help the character, telling him what he needs to do, assuring him that while it may be painful in the moment, the pain will not last, and he will be liberated. The character struggles for a long time, but finally gathers the resolve to flick the lizard off his shoulder. It happens in an instant, and when the lizard hits the ground, it is transformed into a majestic horse which the character rides into the mountains. He has to recognize his own personal demon for what it is and challenge this demon. His initiative and resolve are required. But he does not do it alone. With the weightier matters of life, nor do we.

I am not suggesting that we go back to a primitive way of thinking. I'm suggesting that we not be naïve and assume that we can explain everything in practical, scientific terms. I am true believer in science, but it just doesn't tell us everything. There is still mystery in this world and there always will be, there is still good and evil, but the good is more powerful and will prevail. That sounds like a Star Wars line, I know, but it is also the biblical perspective, and when we are deeply connected to the Source of all goodness, we can participate in this struggle. We can challenge evil in Jesus' strong name.