



SAINT THOMAS CHURCH FIFTH AVENUE
in the City of New York
The Reverend Canon Carl F. Turner, Rector
www.SaintThomasChurch.org

January 31, 2021

The Fourth Sunday After the Epiphany

Festal Eucharist

11am

+

A Sermon by

The Reverend Canon Carl F. Turner, *Rector*

on

Mark 1:21-28

+

Facing our demons

*"You will hear voices saying, 'You are worthless, you have nothing to offer, you are unattractive, undesirable, unlovable.' The more you sense God's call, the more you will discover in your own soul the cosmic battle between God and Satan."*¹

Sobering words from the great spiritual writer, Henri Nouwen. Shortly after leaving Yale where he had been a successful Professor, he experienced his dark night of the soul and was, as it were, tormented by demons.

This is nothing new for those who enter deeply into their spiritual journeys. The great mystics of the Church – Julian of Norwich, Teresa of Avila, John of the Cross, Thérèse of Lisieux – they all experienced their own dark nights of the soul. And perhaps their experience is sometimes like our own. Writing in her diary, St. Thérèse says this about her own darkness:

*"When, weary of being enveloped by nothing but darkness, I try to comfort and encourage myself with the thoughts of the eternal life to come, it only makes matters worse. The very darkness seems to echo the voices of those who do not believe, and mocks at me: 'You dream of light and of a fragrant land; you dream that the creator of this loveliness will be your own for all eternity; you dream of escaping one day from these mists in which you languish! Dream on, welcome death; it will not bring you what you hope; it will bring an even darker night, the night of nothingness!'"*² (*Story of a soul, Chapter IX*)

Some people dismiss those kinds of experiences as evidence that the saints were suffering from bouts of clinical depression, or proof that they were suffering from something akin bi-polar disorder. Others see those experiences as self-indulgent, and it is true that there is always the danger that acknowledging our struggles, admitting that we are finding things hard on our spiritual journey, can inadvertently become a form of spiritual pride.

We are reading the Gospel of Mark this year and it is significant that struggling with demons marks the beginning of the Gospel.

The Gospel begins with the powerful witness of John the Baptist crying in the wilderness as he prepares the way of the Lord, "Repent!" says John, "I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." And into that water stepped Jesus Christ the Son of God. John witnessed the heavens opened and the Spirit descending upon Jesus like a Dove. "A voice came from heaven, 'Thou art my beloved Son; with thee I am well pleased.'" (see Mark 1:1-11)

But next, Jesus must experience all that it is to be human and confront Satan. How significant it is that, after this scene of the baptism of Jesus, Mark tells us that *“The Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. And he was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels ministered to him.”* (Mark 1:12-13)

Jesus experienced his own, dark wilderness experience.

The other synoptic Gospels tell us that Jesus is tempted in very specific ways by Satan. St. Thérèse’s description of her own dark night is so similar:

“Dream on, welcome death; it will not bring you what you hope; it will bring an even darker night, the night of nothingness.”

We, too, have those wilderness experiences when we are battling with evil.

But the temptation of Jesus is the beginning of the end of Satan’s grip on the world, and Thérèse, and all the other mystics knew that. And because of our own baptism we can have confidence in that too – even in our darkest moments. Yesterday, we joyfully celebrated the baptism of a member of our Pilgrims’ Group, even though there could only be six of us present. And the first questions asked of the candidate were:

- **Do you renounce Satan and all the spiritual forces of wickedness that rebel against God?**
- **Do you renounce the evil powers of this world which corrupt and destroy the creatures of God?**
- **Do you renounce all sinful desires that draw you from the love of God?**

The baptism service begins with three renunciations; we stand with Jesus in the wilderness. But, importantly, it is *immediately* followed by three *affirmations*:

- **Do you turn to Jesus Christ and accept him as your Savior?**
- **Do you put your whole trust in his grace and love?**
- **Do you promise to follow and obey him as your Lord?**

Jesus faced down Satan and all his works and then, and only then, did he say *“The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe in the gospel.”* Unlike John the Baptist, Jesus did not stay in the wilderness but began a journey to share that Good News. Last week, we heard of the calling of the first disciples. Today, Mark gives us the first account of Jesus teaching and his first miracle. And again, he encounters evil. Only, this time, the demon recognizes that he has come to destroy evil and to restore the dignity of human nature.

Let us look at the Gospel passage carefully.

First, we notice that the people in the synagogue of Capernaum are astonished at Jesus’ teaching. We are not told what kind of teaching, but we *are* told what it *isn’t* – it is not like the teaching of the scribes. Now, the scribes were those who spent their lives studying the Law – the Torah – and yet, the people in this great synagogue of Capernaum (and we know it was an important synagogue from the archaeological site and the ruins) say that Jesus did not teach like the scribes for he taught *with authority* and *not* as the scribes. This tension between Jesus and the scribes and the pharisees runs through all the gospels. True teaching against false teaching; release of captives rather than restrictions on the People of God. It has been suggested by some biblical commentators that the man possessed of an unclean demon may be speaking as if he were one of those scribes – *“What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us?”*

The story has a fascinating literary construction. Jesus enters the synagogue; he teaches with authority and the people are amazed; the man with the unclean spirit cries out. At this point Jesus performs the exorcism and then there is the same order of events, except in reverse; the man cries out; the people are amazed at his 'new' teaching and then Jesus, we are told by Mark, *immediately* leaves the synagogue.

There is an urgency throughout Mark's Gospel; the Greek word translated as 'immediately' or 'straightway' is used 40 times in the Gospel. There is an urgency to proclaiming the Good News of redemption; there is an urgency in repudiating Satan and all his works.

The demon recognizes Jesus as the Holy One of God but the response of Jesus is sharp and decisive – "*Be silent, and come out of him!*"

The synagogue is the place for the reading of God's Word from the scriptures – the Torah, the Prophets, the singing of the psalms. God's eternal Word has leapt down from heaven and is standing in the midst of the place where he is proclaimed in that written word. His authority is not like that of the scribes because it comes from *within himself* – he has authority because he *is* the Word of God. He silences the demon and also the scribes whom, we presume, could not find him in the scriptures; yet the one possessed of a demonic spirit recognized him in the flesh.

Facing demons is not something we like to think about. For many of us, it belongs in the films like 'The Exorcist', whose post production editing was, I am told rather appropriately, done at 666 Fifth Avenue, across the road from this Church!

But spiritual warfare is as real now as it was at the time of Jesus. And, like Jesus, we are called to face down demons and to silence them.

The fact is that it is unlikely that we will be possessed by an evil spirit because we have been baptized into Christ Jesus and have become a new creation. We have all been marked with the sign of the cross and we should have nothing to fear. So, then, why do so many of us have struggles and battles on our spiritual journeys. Why are we tempted to doubt the efficacy of the Savior's love and his protection?

The reality is that many of these 'demons' are in actual fact part of who we are – internal struggles and flaws in our human nature. In another story later in Mark's Gospel, Jesus meets a boy possessed on an unclean spirit that has made the boy deaf and dumb and causes the boy to endure terrible seizures. Jesus speaks to the boy's father who is desperate for his child, and Jesus encourages him by saying "*All things are possible to him who believes!*" (see Mark 9:14-29) to which the father famously yet pitifully cries out "*I believe; help my unbelief!*"

Help my unbelief – perhaps that is the key to our own dark nights.

Writing in his personal journal, Henri Nouwen wrote this to encourage himself: "*Do not be afraid. Keep deepening your conviction that God's love for you is enough, that you are in safe hands, and that you are being guided every step of the way. Don't be surprised by the demonic attacks. They will increase, but as you face them without fear, you will discover that they are powerless.*"

Elsewhere, in a letter to a friend who was a Baptist Minister, Nouwen wrote these words: "*It is more important to keep our eyes on God, and him alone. We'll never overcome the demons by analyzing them, but only by forgetting them in an all-consuming love for God. Demons love to be analyzed because it keeps our attention directed to them.*"

Remember, the response of Jesus to the man possessed of the unclean demon was simple – "*Be silent, and come out of him!*"

Silencing our demons – particularly if they are things that pull us down; besetting sins, lack of faith; meanness; anger and rage; inappropriate or abusive behaviors; self-loathing – the list is long and we are all able to add to it – is not the same as ignoring them. As all of us know too well, our *personal demons* are often with us even in the happiest times of our lives. At such times, like Jesus did, we acknowledge them but do not allow them to have power over us. We silence them, and rebuke them, knowing that they may still come back to tempt us.

Another time in the city of Capernaum, Jesus met a Centurion – a Roman soldier who was desperate for his servant who was paralyzed and, we are told, in terrible distress. (see Matthew 8:5-13). Jesus does not have another thought but says that he will come and heal him. The centurion utters those powerful words that we shall use just before Holy Communion – *“Lord, I am not worthy that thou shouldst come under my roof...”* At which, we are told, Jesus marveled. Yes, marveled and said to those around him that he had never found such faith in Israel! The healing happened immediately. The centurion said that he was not worthy to receive Jesus under his roof, but he had received him into his heart. We, too, when tormented, afraid, frightened, or ashamed, can say those same words, *“Lord, I am not worthy that thou shouldst come under my roof, but speak the word only, and my soul shall be healed.”*

Jesus *will* help silence our inner, personal demons and come and abide with us.

Nouwen went on to say to his friend, *“God wants our love without any reservation...Don’t spend energy on fighting demons; give all you have to God. There is no other way in finding out where to go or what to do to understand your pain.”*

Let us pray. A Prayer of St. Thérèse of Lisieux:

In the evening of this life, I shall appear before you with empty hands, for I do not ask you, Lord, to count my works. All our goodness is stained and imperfect in your eyes. I wish, then, to be clothed with your own goodness, and to receive from your love the eternal possession of yourself. I want no other throne, no other crown but you, my beloved!

Lord, even if my conscience were burdened with every sin it possible to commit, I would throw myself into your arms, my heart broken with contrition. And, I know how tenderly you welcome any prodigal child of yours who comes back to you. Amen.

^{1.} Henri J.M. Nouwen, from ‘The Inner Voice of Love’

^{2.} Story of a soul, Chapter IX