

Sermon, January 31, 2021

Good morning! Welcome to stay at home worship from St. Mark's Lutheran Church in Oakland, MD. I am Pastor Scott Robinson and today we welcome Nan Gangler, who is providing special music for us on hammered dulcimer. Hopefully before long we will be able to worship in person again. Meanwhile if you would like to help support our ministries and benevolence commitments, you can donate through our web site or Facebook page. Please note our annual congregational meeting will be a virtual Zoom event today at noon. You have been sent the Zoom invitation and the dial-in number for those who want to participate by telephone.

Now today's stupid joke—My memory isn't what it used to be. I say that because here we are at the end of January, and I'm still writing 2017 on my checks.

Music

The Lord be with you. Let us pray. O God, you know that we cannot withstand the dangers which surround us. Strengthen us in body and spirit so that, with your help, we may be able to overcome the weakness that our sin has brought upon us; through Jesus Christ, your Son our Lord. Amen.

A reading from Deuteronomy, the eighteenth chapter.

[Moses said to Israel] The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own people; you shall heed such a prophet. This is what you requested of the LORD your God at Horeb on the day of the assembly when you said: "If I hear the voice of the LORD my God anymore, or ever again see this great fire, I will die." Then the LORD replied to me: "They are right in what they have said. I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their own people; I will put

my words in the mouth of the prophet, who shall speak to them everything that I command. Anyone who does not heed the words that the prophet shall speak in my name, I myself will hold accountable. But any prophet who speaks in the name of other gods, or who presumes to speak in my name a word that I have not commanded the prophet to speak--that prophet shall die."

Here ends the reading.

The Holy Gospel of the Lord, according to Mark, the first chapter.

Jesus and his disciples went to Capernaum; and when the Sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught. They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes. Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, and he cried 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." But Jesus rebuked him, saying, "Be silent, and come out of him!" And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him. They were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, "What is this? A new teaching--with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him." At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.

The Gospel of the Lord.

Let us pray. God of wisdom, may your word be a lamp unto our feet and a light unto our path. Amen.

Vaccinations are picking up now, but there is still much to do before we beat this awful coronavirus. Even with vaccinations, we should continue to wear masks and practice social distancing. It is uncertain at this point if vaccinated folks can still pass on the virus. As a former health care professional, it is much to my chagrin that during a pandemic, here in the first chapter of Mark Jesus began his earthly ministry with an exorcism. Really? An exorcism? The word exorcism comes from a Greek word meaning “to renounce or evict.” In the New Testament an exorcism is the act of driving out demons, or as Mark often calls them “unclean spirits.”

The belief in demonic or spirit possession as a cause of physical and mental illness has been around forever. It is still very much a part of the world’s tribal or so-called primitive religions. And it is also still a part of some of the more advanced religions like Hinduism and Islam, as well as several different species of Christianity. Judaism, on the other hand, is not among them.

In fact there are only three mentions of unclean or evil spirits in the entire Hebrew Bible, which is our Old Testament. And in all three, said spirits are attributed to God and not to a devil or demon. In fact, the Old Testament’s understanding of illness is arguably much closer to MODERN medicine than the NEW Testament’s.

Surprised? an obscure story in First Samuel chapter six indicates ancient Israel already recognized there was a connection between rodents and Bubonic Plague. Had they realized that in the Middle Ages, half the population of Europe might have been spared. The often meticulous details of traditional Jewish health and dietary laws also imply they knew something about bloodborne pathogens. And they also called for isolation—you know—social distancing-- for those with diseases known to be especially contagious.

Israelites also routinely boiled or flamed cooking utensils and medical instruments. If you think the Old Testament's insistence on avoiding contact with blood or bodily fluids seems silly, talk to a dentist or surgeon. You know-- the folks who won't go near you without masks, gloves, gowns, and protective eyewear.

There are no exorcists or exorcisms anywhere in the Old Testament. Although when Saul was troubled by an evil spirit in First Samuel, they brought David in to play songs for him on his lyre. That did settle him down some, but that hardly made David an exorcist. He was instead probably the first Music Therapist.

Saul's evil spirit, by the way, is one of those attributed to God, and not a devil or demon. Scholars suggest Israel's strong belief in monotheism, meaning the belief in and worship of the one and only God, just doesn't allow for other supernatural entities, good or bad.

The New Testament, by contrast, is full of demons, evil spirits and exorcisms. The Greek word for demon-- *δαίμωνιον*--appears around seventy times, mostly in the first three Gospels. Most New Testament exorcisms are credited to either Jesus or "The Twelve." Curiously, there are no exorcisms in the Gospel of John, and not one demon. (Although in one exchange religious authorities accused Jesus of having one.)

The Book of Acts presents Paul as a busy and gifted exorcist. It says evil spirits could be sent packing if you just touched the possessed person with one of Paul's handkerchiefs or aprons. In Paul's own writings, however, he never says a word about exorcisms or evil spirits. He mentions demons once or twice. But links the belief in them to false religions.

It's hard to assess Jesus' own theology of demons, evil spirits and illness from the gospels. Written works typically reflect the beliefs and

worldview of the authors themselves rather than the characters they wrote about. All four gospels indicate Jesus normally blamed evil not so much on demons, but instead on greed, hatred, bigotry and the self-centeredness of the human heart.

Scholars suggest the belief in devils and demons crept into Judean religions in the late centuries BCE and early centuries CE. That was too late for most of the Old Testament but just in time for the New. They suspect the belief in demons was borrowed from Zoroastrianism, the religion of the ancient Persians that was still widespread among people in their former colonies, like Judea.

Today Mainline Protestants don't talk much about evil spirits, demons or devils. (Although when the Duke Blue Devils take-on the Wake Forest Demon Deacons it's usually a pretty good basketball game.) Methodists and Episcopalians still have provisions for what's called "deliverance" in their prayer and occasional services books, but unlike the biblical world, they, like us, recognize we live in a different time and a different culture with a different worldview.

Karl Barth, probably the greatest Protestant theologian of the twentieth century, said it is only the BELIEF in demons that lends them any relevance or authenticity. Therefore, Barth said we just shouldn't believe in them, period.

But first Century Near Easterners knew little about science or modern medicine. They didn't understand the germ theory of disease or for that matter neurological disorders or psychiatry. Conditions ranging from epilepsy to blindness to psychosis to a skin rash were routinely attributed to "demons" by Greek speakers, or to "evil" or "unclean" spirits by those who spoke Aramaic. For the most part, today I think we simply know better.

Possession by evil spirits did not make the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, aka the DSM IV or V, despite the fact that

Psychiatrist Scott Peck lobbied hard for it. He claimed to have personally exorcized demons successfully. His peers, however, thought Dr. Peck really just didn't understand the many nuances of Dissociative Identity disorder. But that's another sermon.

The American Psychiatric Association insists that any attempts to exorcize psychiatric patients are more likely to cause harm than good. And until fairly recently that position didn't sit well with the Catholic Church, which has practiced exorcism off and on for centuries.

When first the book and then the movie called *The Exorcist* came out in the early 1970's, church officials recorded a 750 percent increase in requests for exorcisms, and they performed lots of them. The uptick in Catholic exorcisms eventually received increasing scrutiny. And criticism. Which unfortunately came too late for a young German girl named Anneliese Michel, who sought a voluntary exorcism back in 1975. Seems her parents and two priests convinced her she was possessed by six-- count 'em six--different demons who were responsible for her eating disorder.

Anneliese died after ten months of unrelenting ritual. Seems the spirits that WERE actually plaguing her were more the humankind. The courts agreed. Her parents and both priests were convicted of voluntary manslaughter for failing to call in medical help. Many other injuries and deaths have been caused by supposedly well-meaning exorcists, religious or no. In 2005 Romanian Orthodox Priest Daniel Corogeanu and four nuns crucified a 23-year old nun as part of an exorcism ritual. He was convicted of murder.

The Catholic Church has since adopted a new rite of exorcism. It contains a lot more prayer and a lot less superstition and ritual. And today the Vatican requires all applicants or candidates for exorcism to undergo complete and comprehensive medical and psychological exams. They say for every 5,000 screened, 4,999 of them are denied and referred to the appropriate health care professionals. Thanks be to God.

Martin Luther, at first, believed in demonic possession. But he later realized that exorcisms were being abused by the Church, to prey on the naïve faithful and sometimes to line their own pockets. He suspected some people who have seizures might just have seizure disorders. And most folks with mental and physical illnesses are simply sick, with no demon involved.

Luther advised pastors that if someone really DOES seem to be possessed, pray for them. Nothing works better.

Exorcism rites disappeared altogether from Lutheran pastoral manuals in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, much to the delight of our Calvinist brothers and sisters, who always thought they were silly. My seminary didn't teach me how to exorcize demons. But they did teach me to understand them as part of the worldview of ordinary citizens in the Near East New Testament era.

Meanwhile across Europe, according to the British E-magazine called "The Week," exorcisms are again on the rise. Some attribute the increased demand to growing Pentecostalism. Ironically that is also the sect of Christianity most associated with speaking in tongues. And I said, "ironically," because speaking in tongues was historically considered a sure sign of demonic possession.

Others suspect the growing fascination with malevolent spirits and demon possession stems from the fact that ours is an increasingly dangerous world, and people are just plain frightened. They are seeking help and assurance, regardless of how or where or who it may come from.

And that's what I still get out of odd little Bible stories like this one from the Gospel of Mark. That faith still has a role in illness and healing, both mental and physical, even though it may be a different role from what Mark's first readers may have thought.

I still believe God plays an important role in healing. Not so much by casting out demons, but first of all by giving us modern science and medicine, which have developed preventive measures, and well as effective treatments and even cures for many illnesses. Our faith also plays an important role, by calling us to be part of faith families, whose members look out for and care for each other when they are struggling, whether physically or mentally or both.

While remaining physically apart to be safe when we must, we still gather today as a faith family. A diverse group of individuals called together to pass on to others the love God has shown us. To share joys and laughter, as well as hugs and tears when possible and necessary.

We bring with us our own strengths and weaknesses. Our own gifts and needs. Our similarities and our differences. To tell our own stories and listen to each other's. To celebrate, encourage and console. In other words, to love our neighbors...as ourselves.

Amen
