

Casting Out Demons

[Mark 1:21-28](#)

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Worship at 9:15 and 11 a.m.

Yes, it is true. I am still alive and for this I am grateful. I had four viruses in a row; different ones. I wonder if there is a connection between today's sermon title and those viruses? I appreciate your prayers. I particularly appreciate Harry, on short notice, standing here intervening and preaching very well. So a special thank you to Harry.

And in reference to Harry's letter that has gone out to the congregation this past week, with a sense of hope and expectation for him, along with sadness for the changes that are ahead of us, I want to say, Harry, we're glad you're here, and we're sad going to lose you. But we're glad you're looking forward to a good future with Charlotte.

Let's take a moment to pray together. Gracious God, in the power of your Spirit, through Jesus the Christ, speak to us. Calm our souls, give us the spirit of courage and power, and drive out from us evil that would keep us from the best that you have for us in life. Through Jesus Christ, we now listen to your word. Amen.

Ted Engstrom, the president of World Vision in the past, now President Emeritus, would often tell this story: when he was talking with leaders, people would ask him how he dealt with the difficult people in his life. He said he had a regular, disciplined practice of writing their names on golf balls, teeing them up and saying, with a certain amount of exclamation as he hit the ball, "Go out, in the name of Jesus!"

This morning when I was driving up I noticed, in sequence, on the first outdoor sign, the sermon "Casting out Demons," and noticed then, in the second sign where my name normally is, that it had been taken down and removed from the main sign. And I wondered if there was a connection there!

It is important that we know that there are two significant problems in speaking of evil, addressing evil. According to C.S. Lewis, it is: denying the reality of evil, as if it's not present. Or secondly, becoming so focused and obsessed with it that we forget there is an over-powering presence of the goodness of God in Jesus Christ. I hope we do neither one of those today. It is important that we see, in our culture there continues to be—as always has been—a fascination with the Gothic, with darkness and with evil. Demons, vampires, werewolves, mummies, zombies, hell, evil, ghosts, mediums, witches, demon possession. It seems to even be a stronger message today. Why are we so fascinated with darkness and evil? The gospel reading that we read today in Mark points out clearly that evil starts in the church on Sunday morning. Jesus went to the synagogue on the Sabbath and preached; there he encountered the first demon-possessed person. Look around and wonder where the demons are in this congregation. It is no accident; it is a part of our life that demons will haunt us. But demons do not over-power the church. In the name of Jesus, demons shall not reign. However, they are present.

One of my experiences of dealing with the demonic was working with a man who was both a member of a church and on a church staff. A wonderful, gentle, kind man; a man with a heart of service who easily would break down and cry, with grief and sadness, for other people's pain. However, when under duress, and dealing with issues of strain, particularly around church finances, this man's countenance changed. It was as though he had a double personality. He went almost instantaneously from kind and gentle, to hostile, defensive and intimidating. To the point that the other leaders of the church had to confront and say that this kind of personality could not be what guides our church. They, in a sense, had to do an exorcism. They had to say 'No' to a pattern of a demonic, evil presence that takes over this person when darkness prevails. The confrontation of the group to the individual was a way of saying 'No,' in the name of Jesus, to evil patterns of behavior.

In Mark's gospel, it is clear, not just once but several times, that Jesus is confronted by demons. Jesus is tempted by the devil. Jesus gives his followers the power to cast out demons. The equivalent of that for us today is that we, as disciples, have the power to say 'No' to evil. Jesus wants to make very clear that part of the good news of Jesus Christ is saying 'No' to the bad news of anything that counters the good that God has to offer in this world.

On one particular occasion the disciples encountered a boy who had a demon; and they could not cast the demon out. Jesus had just come down from the Mount of Transfiguration and basically said: how long do I have to work with you perverse people? I think I've taught you how to do this. And they said, 'Lord, we couldn't do it.' Jesus did cast the demon out and said, in some cases, the demons are so deeply-imbedded they only come out with sustained prayer and fasting – personal sacrifice. Demons are nothing to toy with.

Now there are some who think that demons only exist as one kind of entity. But, I'm here to suggest today that the demonic comes in many different forms and many different ways. That, overall, the gospel statement is clear that Jesus has authority over all forms of evil. Evil cannot stand in the presence of Jesus. Jesus must confront evil and say: 'Out! We will not allow you to be present, to dominate, or control, or possess the people who are present.'

A small group of people came to me in a church several years ago and asked me to help them. They told a story that I had quite often heard, of how a small group had a particular person in its midst who dominated and controlled it. This particular woman who was the dominating presence happened to be trained as a litigating lawyer; she was known as the 'pit bull' of legal processes in that community. I don't think we have very many people like that here. When she spoke, no one else would dare to speak because, if they dared to take her on, she would cut them and spit them out. She made sure that her words and her style were totaling intimidating.

The group would not confront her and so they came to me and said, "Pastor, we have a favor to ask. Will you please take this woman aside and tell her to behave?" Now there's a temptation immediately in that. I said, "No, I won't." "Well, pastor, that's why we pay you – to deal with the hard cases in our culture." I said, "No. Actually you pay me to help you deal with the hard cases. I will coach you and pray with you so that you can confront this woman's pattern of life." "Oh, no. We couldn't do that; she'll destroy us." I said, "Well, when you're ready to do it, come back and talk to me." They were not very happy with me. About three months later they came back and spoke with me again. They said, "Pastor, this woman is destroying our group. If we don't do something we will not be able to meet again." I said, "Are you ready to confront her?" And they said, "Okay, but we don't like it." We talked and prayed about how to say 'No' to this woman's pattern of life. The essence of the confrontation went like this: we love you and we want you to be a part of the group, but we will not allow you to control our conversation and life together. You must be a sharing participant.

And so at the next meeting the group confronted her. She became very angry, enraged, chewed them out, cussed them down, and slammed the door as she walked out of the room. She said, "I'm never coming back to this group or this church. How dare you?" Demons don't go out easily. They convulse. They came back to me and said, "Pastor, you see what you did to us? You made us confront her and now she hates us. Now we're never going to see her again." And I was quietly thinking to myself, 'God works in mysterious ways.' About six months later, the woman came back to the group. She said, "I've done a lot of thinking. I started wondering why it is, that it seems like every small group I've ever been in, fell apart. And then it dawned on me that I was the hurtful, destructive presence. You were the first people who had the courage to tell me that. Will you accept me back?"

There was a demon cast out that day, if not several. Was the demon the woman? No. The demon is that which takes over the woman and possesses her under certain circumstances. If there is one thing I've seen regularly in American culture and in the church, we are afraid to cast out demons. We are afraid to name them and to say 'No' to them. It starts in the church. How can we say 'No' in the culture if we can't say 'No' in the church? And you say, what are demons? This particular word for evil spirit in the gospel text is a word that literally means "against the best." Anti-good... impure... unclean... anti-service... against healing... against cure... against relief. The person who's against being at home or domesticated... the

person who is given to a wild spirit... who has jettisoned safety and security to do attack and intimidation. It is the same word that implies fear, timidity, guilt, shame, dourness, bitterness and cowardice. In other words, demons cut us off from the best of life, and move us toward the worst.

This is the essence of the demonic: it possesses a person or a group and drives out the good. It preserves and holds onto the worst that human beings can experience. The essence of the spirit of evil is that it is a spirit; it is something that is taken-in by a human being or by a group, and it is absorbed and breathed in. The question: What have you been smoking? is a perfectly right question. What have you been drinking? What air have you been breathing today? What spirit have you been absorbing that will drive you to do darkness rather than good? It is the taking-in, the receiving, the soaking-up, the absorption of that which is not good to the human soul.

Now this doesn't mean that the person had a choice in it. There are many cases of people who are full of the demonic who had no choice in the process. People who were abused at young ages or even earlier than birth times – pre-uterine – who have had violent experiences, and they literally come out in birth hurt and maimed for life. The demonic has become a pattern for them early. It is that which haunts, consumes, possesses, enslaves, imprisons, confuses, contorts, alienates and isolates the person because they have been through something terrible or have they taken-in something tragic. It is addiction and abuse embodied in a person.

Now does that mean I don't mean I believe in literal demons that are beings who do evil? Well, I'm not here to argue that case today; that's a long conversation. But, I'm here to say that what human beings take-in, for better or for worse, impacts their spirit. And if we have people who are being abused, who are addicted, who have taken-in the wrong things, chances are, their spirits are going to start manifesting the wrong pattern of life.

One of my most favorite, but tragic, scenes in all of the movies is in Godfather I at the very end of the movie when Robert DeNiro has become the new Don of the family. He has decided to take revenge on all of his enemies. And the haunting image is DeNiro, at the point where he is saying, as godfather for his baptized god-child; and while he is saying that he has rejected the devil, and evil, and evil practices, he is systematically killing all of his enemies. You get the definitive sense that the spirit of darkness has taken-over his soul. That is his choice in that particular case.

Saul, in the Old Testament, the first king of Israel, was hand-picked because God saw in him the potential of leadership. He stood a head and shoulders taller than all of the rest of the Israelites and was one of the most handsome men of his day. He was built in charisma for leadership. But it wasn't too long after he was called to be king, that Samuel the prophet says of Saul: he has such a little view of himself in his own eyes. He has such a low self-esteem. Somewhere along the line he inherited or absorbed the spirit of low self-esteem. And what does Saul do? He starts doing things to build himself up; building monuments to himself. Refusing to listen to God and only listening to his own inner voices. And it's not too long after that, that it says Saul has an evil spirit. And it haunts him the rest of his life. Where did Saul get that evil spirit? He got it because he gave over to a pattern of life that doesn't involve the voice of God, but involves other negative feelings and faults.

Some friends of ours adopted a child from a foreign nation; in fact they have adopted a couple of them. Early on in this child's life there was a sense of brightness and hope and wonderment, as any baby and toddler is born to demonstrate, and positive times. But when the child became an adolescent and teenager, darkness began to cover his countenance. And they said, 'what is this?' The darkness was so pervasive that the child tried to commit suicide. He tried to do damage to other people; he became a sociopath and was unable to be controlled. And almost every psychologist and spiritual director said that this child was abused before he was born and terrorized in his earliest years of his birth and young life. He was full of a dark spirit. And to this day, they have not been able to find a way to prayerfully exorcise that demonic presence in his life. He is still locked up in jail; that's the only place where people trust him to be.

Some demons come out with great difficulty. Some demons don't seem to have a cure. But Jesus is the most powerful presence who can say 'No' to even to the impossible demon. It is important that we see in

this text that the good news of the gospel is always juxtaposed to the really bad news of evil. There is no good news unless we confront the evil that is present among us, in us and between us. People are amazed and astonished that Jesus has the power to say 'No' to this kind of evil because they are used to living with it. This demon-possessed man has been in the church and in the synagogue on Sunday mornings, week after week, month after month, year after year and no one has done anything about it. But when Jesus shows up, the demons can't handle it: "Jesus, have you come here to destroy us?" And Jesus cast the demon out. Only the power of Jesus can cast out evil.

When Dietrich Bonhoeffer was growingly concerned about Nazi Germany, he published in a 1933 paper, a way to exorcise the demon of Nazism and false German Christianity. It went something like this: 1. confront and question the state justice patterns; call the state into accountability. 2. help the victims of injustice, whether they are Christians or not, particularly Jews, so that they receive the grace of Jesus Christ from Christians; and 3. if need be, throw yourself on the wheels of the machinery to be crushed in the name of Jesus, to say 'No' to evil. In other words, sacrifice your life, if it costs, to be able to exorcise the worst demon. And so Dietrich Bonhoeffer made the decision, even though he was a pacifist, that he would actively seek the death of Adolph Hitler and the end of Nazism—because he believed it was equivalent of exorcism a demon.

This is serious business. If you are troubled with an evil spirit yourself, then don't tolerate it. Get some help. If you are following Jesus, you have a responsibility, like these disciples learned, to exorcise demons and say 'No' to them. Do not abdicate your responsibility. But they come out with great training, prayer, perseverance, fasting and patience. It is not easy to learn the discipline of exorcism.

I know this sermon is a little spooky and scary, but then the story at the beginning of the gospel is plenty spooky and scary. However here is the final word: evil will not stand. Evil will not reign. People who are possessed with evil spirits can have them expelled, in the name of Jesus. Jesus' power is greater than all evil. Remember the words of the Apostle Paul as he spoke to his disciple, Timothy: "Rekindle the gift of God that is within you, Timothy. Through the laying on of hands, you received a spirit of strength. For God did not give us a spirit of cowardice but rather a spirit of power, and of love and of self-discipline." Exercise that spirit. Say 'No' to evil and say 'Yes' to Jesus, the Christ.

Let us pray. Lord Jesus Christ, today we say 'No' to evil and 'Yes' to you. Help us to breathe in the power of your Spirit and breathe out to exhale the evil spirits that can possess us. Give us the courage to become exorcists of any spirit that might damage your people or your world. We pray so in the powerful name of Jesus Christ, who lives and loves in grace. Amen.