

Let's Exorcise

What is *your* demon?

What is inside of you, in the recesses of your soul, that seems to haunt you? Maybe it feels like some distant memory, never fully formed, never right there at the forefront of your mind, and yet...it is always there...you can't escape it.

What is the one thing that, if the Lord Jesus himself was standing here, right now, you would ask of him, "Won't you *please* take this thorn from my flesh?"

What *is* your demon?

As humans, flawed and broken as we are, we all bring something with us when we come to the altar. Regrets that seem to *gnaw* on us each and every day. The memory of an altercation that never peacefully resolved. A hidden addiction...hidden as much out of the inability to overcome it as it is because we are ashamed to admit we are powerless over an outside force. Perhaps you feel it is something *more* than psychological, or physiological, something truly diabolical inside of you. Perhaps you find yourself hearing the story of the man with an unclean spirit and saying quietly to yourself, "*That's me.*"

I can't help but imagine this poor man, beset by something diabolical, waiting in the synagogue, the holy place...waiting for *release*, waiting for *deliverance*, waiting for a time when he won't be overcome by this tidal wave of *anger, desperation, and fear*. Waiting for so long but never able to find the release he so desperately needs. Maybe you believe that you, too, are beset by devils, demons, by something more than just a painful memory, a misspent youth, a shameful secret.

Whatever it is...whatever your demon is...whatever you have carried with you to this place that causes you to feel a sense of desperation...hear these words as if they were meant just for you:

“Be silent, and come out!”

Having prepared himself for the complex struggles his ministry would force him into...struggles against religious leaders and traditions that stifled the power of the very God who set the Big Bang into motion with a single word...struggles against the iron fist of an occupying legion known for violence and domination...struggles against anything demonic that stood against the unfolding Kingdom of God...Jesus entered the synagogue to worship and to teach. *Amazement* filled the room. A *fresh* teaching, something *new*, full of *authority*. A sharp contrast to what the scribes had been offering for generations.

And this fresh teaching, this vibrancy, came face to face with the unclean spirit crippling and debilitating the man. ‘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.’

What have you to do with us... an expression used throughout Scripture to indicate the *absolute* and *insurmountable* difference between two things. But here, as I read it, it’s not a cry of opposition, but of *fear*...the realization that the demon’s time was up. This demon, quivering before his destruction, aware of his demise. For the deep truth that even this demon knew is that anything which separates us from the healing and liberating love of God simply cannot abide in the presence of the Holy One!

Here we are, the 4th Sunday after the Epiphany...a season where we ponder the majesty and the beauty of the many revelations of and witnesses to Jesus’ power. And *what a witness* this miracle is. The Venerable Bede, an seventh century monk, captures so well the power of this

story: “It was appropriate, since death first entered into the world through the devil’s envy, that the healing medicine of salvation should first operate against him...The presence of the Savior is the torment of the devils.” As the Gospel of Mark tells it, after his baptism and temptation in the wilderness, and after calling the first disciples by the Sea of Galilee, this is the very first public act of ministry performed by Jesus. It’s a declaration of power, a demarcation of his territory. The Lord of All, silencing a demon...silencing the greed and envy of the devil...an envy that seeks to claim that which rightfully belongs to God.

The presence of the Savior is the torment of the devils. And so I ask again, “What is your demon?” Bring it to light. In this moment, in this holy place, be vulnerable and risk naming whatever it is that remains for you a source of torment, of shame, of anxiety. Maybe you are one of the lucky ones who doesn’t have one of these ‘demons’, one of these ‘devils’ that holds you back, drags you down. But for those in this place who hear the story of the man with an unclean spirit and say quietly to yourself, “That’s me”, there is something deeply liberating for you in this Gospel. Realize that the struggle to overcome that which oppresses you is not really your struggle. It’s not *your* fight. In fact, it’s not really a fight at all. All there is for us to do is to put ourselves at the feet of the Holy One of God and hear him say to whatever it is that seizes and torments us, “Be silent, and come out.”

Full disclosure: I love movies about exorcisms. Probably because they are the only types of movies that feature clergy as the heroes, rather than bumbling comic relief. But everyone of them portrays this battle as something fierce, war-like. Lots of screaming, bodies twisting into unnatural postures. Buckets and buckets of holy water...you know the deal. But here, in this story, the power is manifested differently. There are no ancient rituals, no holy water, no religious professionals. Just the voice of one having authority saying to you, “You are my child.

My beloved. I see your pain. It has become my own. I hear your prayers. I have brought them to my Father. I hold you deeply in my heart and I say to all the demons and the voices of unworthiness, of fear, of pain, anxiety, oppression, addiction...*shut up*. You have no claim over my beloved.”