

Casting Out the Demons

Listen again to that last sentence: “And he went throughout Galilee, proclaiming the message in their synagogues and casting out demons.” Mark’s statement reminds us, first of all, that Jesus cannot and will not be limited to staying in one location. His disciples wanted to keep him in Capernaum. But Jesus cannot be confined. His mission field was at first all of Galilee, then all of Palestine, and today, all the world. Secondly, he has a message that the world needs to hear. Only Mark hasn’t yet revealed in full what that message is. We have to wait until the end of the gospel to understand it fully. And we all know what happens at the end of Mark’s gospel. And third, as Jesus “went throughout Galilee, proclaiming the message,” he was also “casting out demons.” Implying that demons were a common phenomenon in Jesus’ day. As, I would propose, they are in ours.

Right before our passage, and right at the very beginning of his ministry, just after he had been tempted in the wilderness, had come to Galilee, and had called his first four disciples (namely Simon and Andrew, James and John), Jesus cast out his very first demon. In 1:21 we are told that on the Sabbath, Jesus had entered the synagogue in Capernaum, and began to teach. In that synagogue there was a man with “an unclean spirit,” which 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.” This demon, in other words, was the first character in Mark’s story to recognize Jesus for who he truly was. Not one of the disciples, certainly not one of the religious leaders, but a demon. And Jesus simply said, “Be silent, and come out of him!” The demon did come out. And at once, Mark says, “[Jesus’] fame began to spread.”

Next comes our passage. As we heard, immediately after Jesus and his disciples left the synagogue, they entered Simon and Andrew’s house. Where, we are told, their mother-in-law has a fever. Jesus takes her by the hand, lifts her up, and “the fever left her.” As if her fever were merely another kind of demon.

Next, we are told that “at sundown,” which is another way of saying “once the Sabbath was over,” the whole city came to him, bringing “all who were sick or possessed with demons.” Which presumably was a lot of people.

I looked up the word “demon” in my *Eerdman’s Dictionary of the Bible*. In Greek thought, demons were “intermediary spiritual beings” that could be either good or bad, but became a convenient explanation for bad things that happened in the world. By the time of the New Testament, the word “demon” was used to refer not just to your ordinary “malevolent spirits” but to actual agents of Satan, whose mission was to oppose the work of God, and specifically, Jesus’ ministry. And so Jesus needed to defeat them if his ministry was to be successful. The article points out that in the Bible and other Christian literature demons might either “oppress” a person (attacking them from without) or “possess” (attacking a person’s mind or body from within). Demons were believed to cause diseases and sicknesses of all kinds.

Do we believe in demons? I also looked the term up in my *Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary, Tenth Edition*, and the very first definition was a simple one: “1a: an evil spirit; and 1b: “a source or agent of evil, harm, distress, or ruin.” Not all that different from the definition in my Bible dictionary. And remarkably real sounding.

I would like to propose a new definition for the term. I propose that a demon is anything that invades our physical, mental, emotional, or spiritual lives, causing a state of illness or unwell-ness, and in so doing works contrary to the will and way of God. Sound good? (Or I should say, sound bad?)

With that definition in mind, what kinds of demons have we dealt with or are we dealing with in our lives? I'll go first. How about the demon of depression and anxiety? Some of us have battled or are still battling the demon of cancer. Or any other life-threatening disease. For some, the demon of a life-altering injury. Others have fought with the demon of addiction. For some, the demon of strained or broken relationships. For others, the demon of grief and loss.

But demons don't have to be clinical or dramatic in order to be pervasive and debilitating: for example, the demon of discouragement. Maybe you've been looking for a job for a long time, but are still unable to find one. Or how about the demon of doubt.

I'm quite certain there are others. Our demons can often be very personal and difficult to talk about. Even in the church. Or maybe especially in the church. But they can also be a helpful way to name our struggles. Lois and I invite you to share about your demons with one of us. Consider it part of our job.

In the Gospel of Mark, as we've seen, Jesus' casting out of demons goes hand in hand with his proclamation of good news. We might even say it is one of the centerpieces of his ministry, one of the reasons God sent him. Especially if we're talking about "the demon," the chief demon or Lord of all demons, Satan. A Bible scholar by the name of Ched Myers wrote a commentary on the Gospel of Mark called *Binding the Strong Man*. His title comes from the parable Jesus used in Mark 3:20-30, where Jesus says to some problematic scribes accusing Jesus of working hand in hand with Beelzebul, "How can Satan cast out Satan? . . . No one can enter a strong man's house and plunder his property without first tying up the strong man; then indeed the house can be plundered." It's fairly clear in this parable that the strong man is Satan. It is more subtle, but in the end no less clear that the one entering the strong man's house and tying him up is none other than Jesus himself.

By the way, the subtitle of Myers' book is *A Political Reading of Mark's Story of Jesus*. By the term "political" he doesn't mean our current system of electing leaders and governing our countries, but rather the much broader, but no less current, systems of oppression and violence, social, economic, and political domination that pervade our world. Some of you may have read or at least heard of Walter Wink, and his trilogy on the systemic and destructive powers which pervade our world: volume I is *Naming the Powers*; volume II *Unmasking the Powers*; and volume III *Engaging the Powers*. This is very much what Myers' commentary on Mark is talking about. In fact, Wink calls Myers' book "the most important commentary on a book of scripture since Barth's *Romans*." Safe to say that not a day goes by where we don't hear on the news examples of how these powers are at work in our world, in sometimes subtle but other times obvious, blatant ways.

But there is good news. Jesus came to bind up the strong man, to cast out not only the demons in our world (plural, with a small d), but the Demon of demons, Satan. Jesus may have started in a very small place, namely ancient Galilee. But remember, he cannot be confined to one location. He is, even now, traveling throughout our land, healing illnesses, casting out demons, defeating darkness, and preaching the good news of God's Kingdom. So come to him. Call to him. He came to cast out our demons as well.

Amen.