



Proper 4, Year B – January 29, 2012

Mark 1.21-28

A Homily preached by the Rev'd Tara Livingston

Deliver us from evil...

Near the beginning of Mark's gospel, Jesus begins his public life by having the spirit of God descend upon him like a dove. This is a very clear image of him becoming filled with the spirit of God – with the spirit of good. Following this Jesus quickly gathers together his disciples, faces temptation in the desert and is found teaching with authority in the synagogue. All of this and we are just finishing the first chapter.

When you think miracles, when you think of the Church school images of the miraculous things that Jesus did while on earth, what is it that comes to mind? Healing the sick, raising the dead, feeding the multitudes and even turning water into wine. He calms the stormy waters and walks across its surface. An image that likely doesn't pop into mind is that of an exorcism, yet this is the first miracle of Christ's public life.

Now we have the misfortune in living in a time where pop culture has infiltrated our inner thoughts. I myself find it difficult to imagine this public miracle without envisioning Linda Blair staring in horror at her daughter; eyes ablaze and her neck on a swivel and saying unspeakable things about Jesus. So let us re-envision the exorcism story that we heard today as this battle is clearly setting the stage for the epic battle of good against evil.

It is sometimes difficult for us, for those of us who consider ourselves to be educated, intellectual, thoughtful, discerning people of the world to imagine a demon. Surely we have over our lifetimes spent some time listening to the arguments about biblical passages that can either, a, be explained away by modern sciences or b, are relegated to a well-we-don't--understand-right-now-but-science-will-figure-it-out-soon category. We as modern, thoughtful people, believe that we can educate ourselves out of any problem or innovate our way from any dilemma.

But here is this gospel of Mark, which when examined in its broader context, challenges us out of that way of thinking. This gospel, today's reading, pares all of that down to a fight between good and evil.

The author sets up the perfect examples of what the rest of the gospel is going to be about. The good news of Jesus is that he, the Christ, is filled with the goodness of God and he's going up against the evils of the world. Sometimes like in today's reading the evil is literally a demon who recognizes Jesus' authority but always, the evils are the evil's found in everyday life.

The evil of doubt.

The evil of misused power.

The evil of self-aggrandizement.

The evil of prioritizing earthly pleasures over obligations.

The evil of a lack of hope.

Jesus, in the chapters following this, Jesus confronts all of these evils armed with the power of the spirit, the spirit of God that descended on him.

Now we in our very modern, very educated, very scientific world are still confronted with these evils. Those of us gathered here today can take a self-accounting and identify those things which prevent us from becoming our best selves; those evils that hold us back from God and from one another.

We may be addicted to a substance; alcohol, narcotics either prescribed or otherwise, tobacco or caffeine. Our modern day world says that we can educate or innovate our way out of those addictions.

Or, we can believe it when we say each week "deliver us from evil."

Some of the evil's which we succumb to might be less obvious. They may be rigidity or our unforgiving nature. It may be our need to be right and perfect all of the time and our expectations of others to be the same. The evil may be our avoidance of what's hard at home through the illusion of high achievement at work. The evil may be our inability, or our unwillingness, to put ourselves in the shoes of another thereby allowing us only to see the world through our own eyes and through the lens of our own unique experience. The evil may be our own unwillingness to step outside of ourselves and recognize injustice and respond to it.

This is not, as you can see, an exhaustive list.

It is true that many of these examples can be responded to by educating and innovating our way out of them. As a counsellor I advocate first identifying what might be holding you back and as a person and a priest I encourage you to not do so alone. I don't think that educating and innovating can be enough. God won't do it for us, but God will do it with us

In AA, the twelve step program for people with addictions, the first step is to accept that you are powerless over that which controls your life and the second is to give yourself over to a higher power. There is great wisdom in those two statements. Something amazing happens when you can surrender yourself to rely on the support of the God who created you and saw that it was good. There is also something simplifying about the very step of recognizing things that hold you back in your life in the terms of good and evil. The goodness of God, the goodness of the spirit, can help you along the way of combatting that which seizes you and takes you away from your best path; your best self.

The good news, the great news, is that while we strive to live our lives in a way that will be pleasing to God, God does not abandon us when we stray. The great news is that Jesus, who fully embodied all that was good, is our companion on the journey. The great news is that while we struggle to examine ourselves and to take measure of our faults and failings, we are loved. The great news is that while we educate and innovate our way to a healthier way of living we do not do so alone, because Jesus did not abandon the man, only the evil that overtook him.

So today as we say the Lord's Prayer, think about what you might mean when you say "deliver us from evil." And you might also consider the true meaning of what you are saying when you utter the words "your will be done."