

What Forces Possess Us?

Sermon by Pastor Patricia Geiseman

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Epiphany 3

Mark 1:21-28

For more than a couple years now, my husband, Ed, and I have been watching British detective programs on Netflix. Sometimes I have trouble understanding the dialogue due to the heavy brogue, but usually get the gist. Themes are common: Everyone is flawed, everyone is suspicious. Even the detectives struggle with demons of their own. The last series we watched was especially complicated. River, the lead detective, was regularly visited by hallucinations of the dead, most frequently his murdered partner. His visitors both haunted and helped him.

Right now we are watching season two of *The Crown*, which is not about a crime, but is complicated in its own way as Elizabeth struggles to be a wife, mother, daughter, sister and the Queen of England. It's not easy to be Queen! I have more compassion for her than I had before, and for Charles, too.

Detectives seek to uncover the truth, and as they do, many dark secrets are revealed. The Queen seeks to govern, to make decisions for the benefit of Britain, but when she does, people she loves feel hurt, betrayed and abandoned.

Forces that keep us from living in the Light

Even at the end of January, we are still in Chapter 1 of Mark's Gospel. Jesus has been baptized, retreated to the wilderness, proclaimed the coming of God's realm, and called followers. Our lesson today is his opening act. Jesus begins in the synagogue teaching with authority. *Exousia*. Divine power! There is no parable, no lesson, and no sermon on the mount. Instead, Jesus casts out a demon.

There are 18 miracle stories in Mark; 13 are healing; and 4 of the 13 are exorcisms.

In the time of Jesus, fear of demons loomed large. People lived in a haunted environment where no area was safe from demonic invasion and domination. Demons inhabited the dry sands of the desert as well as the depths of the sea. They were feared most at night. But no time, no day, no condition provided shelter or escape.

William Barclay wrote, "People believed that the air was so full of demons that it was not possible to insert a point of a needle into the air without touching one." (from *There are Demons in the Sea*, Richard Carl Hoefler)

Kind of like flu germs for us right now!

Historians tell us that Christianity spread, in part, *due to the success in casting out the fear of demons*.

The first listeners to this story would have quickly connected the man possessed by a demon in the synagogue to the occupation of Rome.

The story is social and political. The people were possessed in many ways by powerful forces.

This is more than a once-upon-a-time miracle story about one man in ancient Palestine. Mark tells us that God broke into history through Jesus of Nazareth. And that he was connected to Divine Power that healed and restored people.

Jesus shared this power with his followers, the church and now with us.

We are both exorcized and empowered.

Still, people are possessed by powerful forces.

Still, forces wreak havoc with us as individuals, communities and countries. People struggle and suffer with so much! Mental illness, addictions, abuse and racial hatred.

Friday afternoon as I was reading an article about the power of denial, an email from Presence Health popped up. It was from a Faith Community nurse—not our Faith Community Nurse, Jean, but another nurse named Faith. She asked if I would take a short Interfaith Mental Health Cluster Survey. Even though I was busy with denial, I took the survey.

The Faith Community nurses want to know what more they can do related to education and resources on the powerful forces of depression, suicide prevention, grief and coping with loss, domestic violence, substance abuse, parenting and mental illness within the congregation.

Faith, the nurse, wrote that, in Kane County, *mental illness is one of the leading causes of hospitalization* and is perceived by parents as a top health concern for adolescents. Does that surprise you?

We are not first-century people, but we have demons of our own. And in some way demons are everywhere! Forces that keep us from living in the Light.

The demon of negativity vs. the power of trust

One powerful and prolific demon is negativity. It's one most of us are familiar with. Richard Rohr writes about it in *Breathing Underwater*.

“When we need something to worry about, to be angry or upset about, we begin on a negative foundation. And if we begin negatively, we’re probably going to end negatively. It’s no wonder that so many of us, against our best intentions, have become negative people, operating out various kinds of toxic energy. Those energies are often taken on by entire families. For some of us it’s the only kind of response we have modeled for us early in life. We were told what we did wrong, what we should not feel, what we should be afraid of. We were not told how to see and feel the good. How to trust life instead of death.”

(Richard Rohr, *Radical Grace*, Daily Meditations page 65 and 66)

Jesus taught us to trust life. To join his healing force that frees whatever holds back goodness and to have courage. We need it.

The demon of fear vs. the power of love

Fear is a demon that diminishes us. It robs us of energy. We all experience fear. We all do. Even the president. No one escapes. The wise ones admit it. And with eyes open, face it.

If we look the other way, we get eaten alive!

Fear may come from an external source, such as parents or teachers—critical messages we absorbed long ago. We know that words have the power to harm or to heal. And sometimes we take on other people’s fear. We soak in fear that is not our own.

And some of our fears are self-induced. Messages of “I’m not good enough” distort reality.

It can be hard to look through the lens of love...at the people, the world and ourselves. Our daily lives, our choices as persons and as a community are an enactment between dark and light, a test of the heart. (Judith Orloff, *Positive Energy*)

We need all the help we can get. There is always something to be afraid of. But in every experience of depression, loss, and loneliness, there is a way to grow larger, more compassionate instead of shutting down.

I have seen this in you so many times over the years.

In your grief and despair, you have made space for the light to shine in. You have been open to healing and hope. And in your openness, your own hearts were mended and beat again with renewed strength.

What a difference this has made for you and for all of us!

Throughout the Bible, angels and Jesus himself tell people who are immobilized and shaking with fear, “Do not be afraid!”

It’s good for us to be honest with ourselves and admit our fears... whatever they may be. Being alone, not being good enough—at work... at school...or as a parent. We worry about the kind of legacy we will leave.

Throughout my decades of ministry, the church has changed a lot. Even over the last ten years, so much has changed. What will happen? How do we reach out with a message of hope and healing and include busy people in the mission?

When I visit older faithful people whose lives have been lived with courage and commitment, I wonder and I worry. *Are we, am I*, equipping people to take their place, people who will carry on?

Many of us are afraid for the well-being of the young. We want our children to grow up to be caring and compassionate, but we also want them to be smart and safe and to speak up.

Too often the world seems possessed by the misuse of power, by the forces of violence and deceit. We feel rudderless on the sea, with waves pounding our little boats. Who has the authority, the power to calm the sea, to tell the demons, “Be quiet!”?

When we are afraid for the world, the church and our children... we can take a breath. (Yahweh!) And pray that our fear be lifted. We can stay open.

An attitude of gratitude

When I am afraid for the future and worry about our children, the whole church and this congregation, I find that gratitude helps ease my seasickness. Gratitude doesn’t just happen. You know this, too. We have to seek it out.

Thursday I took my mother to the doctor for a checkup. She didn’t want to go. You know why! In case the doctor would find something wrong! So, I asked her, “Mom, is it better not to know?”

“Oh yes,” she said, “I am fine!”

There is a great line in the film *Spotlight*. “*Never underestimate the power of denial.*”

So, I reminded my mother that the doctor is on her side, part of her healing team. Be thankful for her!

So, my mother said to the doctor, “I thank God every day for what I can do. I can still walk and take care of myself.”

As we left the appointment I read words stenciled on the office wall:

... ***Count your blessings.... Make your blessings count...***

An attitude of gratitude diminishes the demon of fear.

We may not be detectives, but we seek the truth. We may not be the Queen, but we care for the well being of all the people. And, like them, we are complicated and conflicted.

There are many forces that possess us, demons that hold on to us: fear, worry, negativity, resentment, denial, anger, shame and guilt. These are powerful forces.

But we are connected to a more powerful force! One that calls us by name and claims us as Beloved! This Force is one of compassion and courage. It brings healing and hope. For us and for the world.

Together we share a vision that invites us to trust in life and to live in the Light.

We are exorcized, and empowered, to be part of this Divine Agenda.

Amen.

Resources include:
Judith Orloff, *Positive Energy*
Richard Rohr, *Radical Grace*
Richard Carl Hoefler, *There are Demons in the Sea*
workingpreacher.org
Feasting on the Word for Epiphany 3, year B

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