

THE REIGN OF GOD 2: DEMONS

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Camrose United Church
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Deuteronomy 18: 15-20 - A new prophet like Moses
Psalm 111 (responsive reading), *Voices United*, p. 833
Mark 1: 21-28 - The man with the unclean spirit

We're talking about the Reign of God. As noted in last Sunday's reading from the first chapter of Mark, Jesus came, telling people the Reign of God is at hand, the time has come. We just have to believe that for our lives to be turned around. The story today from Mark's gospel is about this person with the unclean spirit, and Jesus commanding the spirit to come out of him--an exorcism, I guess we could call it. It had something to do with demons. So this second sermon in the series on the Reign of God is about what to do with the demons in the world.

The story in the Old Testament reading spoke of Moses as a particular kind of prophet. It led people to live in the promise of a prophet like Moses who would come again. And what was it to be like Moses? Well, there may be many answers to that, but perhaps the most important is that Moses led the people out of slavery into freedom. Jesus' freeing this man from the demon is another liberation story. And so we seek to be set free from the demons that rule our lives.

I mentioned last week Walter Wink's trilogy of books about naming and unmasking and engaging the powers in the world. There is a lot of different language for these powers--demons, principalities, powers, rulers, authorities. But an awful lot of the New Testament is about those powers, and Wink says that in New Testament times these powers or demons were personified--they were spoken about as if they were living creatures that hovered above us somewhere in heaven, or maybe below us, and could intervene and occupy not only individual souls but also the souls of organizations and institutions in our culture. Wink says we need to be able to speak, to name, these powers in our world today. In some respects we've lost that ability, partly because it's hard for us to accept this metaphysical understanding of these powers as creatures and beings that exist apart from the world. So he says what we need to do is let go of that as the first-century way of understanding or talking about the powers.

[At this point Pastor Jim's microphone batteries appeared to fail, so he turned to the pulpit microphone and, without losing the proverbial beat, commented "It's either a dead battery or a demon in the sound system. Anyway, good exorcism, Bob." Bob Walline was taping the sermon.]

And so the way for us to speak of the powers today is to understand them as the interior reality, not only of individuals but of organizations and governments and institutions in our culture. Every one of them has both an external manifestation and an interior reality.

What we end up doing, therefore, is talking about the demons or the demonic that we experience within ourselves and in our world. Now it's a challenge, and that's the reason Wink wrote his book. It's a challenge for us to claim a language that enables us to name the demonic powers in our world. So part of my challenge in doing this series is to try out ways of naming images, illustrations, that help us grasp a sense of what Wink is talking about.

I found a hymn (*Voices United*, 620) the text of which does that well. It's Thomas Troeger's "Silence, Frenzied, Unclean Spirit." He has done, I think, some profound work using language to describe the unclean spirits of our time, and I want to use some of his images as a way for us to reflect on this. In verse one he says: "'Silence, frenzied, unclean spirit!' cried God's healing Holy One. 'Cease your ranting! Flesh can't bear it; flee as night before the sun.'" These demons, this demonic in the interior, lack substance just as darkness lacks substance. There isn't a world full of darkness which moves on and the light comes in. All darkness is, is the absence of light. I remember years ago a colleague of mine in seminary was asked to go to a church youth group (I think it was) and talk about witchcraft. So he struggled long and hard to figure out how to talk about witchcraft to a group of youth in the church. I remember him telling me the most important metaphor he struck on was that witchcraft should be treated like an unloaded gun. We all know how to handle an unloaded gun--just as if it were loaded. It was a good metaphor because it said two things: First, there is no ammunition, there is no power, there is no real danger, and yet we treat it as if it were loaded. Second, of course an unloaded gun can be powerful, can't it? If someone walks out in front of you and puts a gun in your face, that person can exercise a great deal of power over you. Even if the gun is unloaded, you don't know whether it is or not. So there's a picture of the demonic.

Another example was a front-cover picture on a magazine--it might have been something like "The Christian Century" or "Christianity Today"--back in the 1980's when the nuclear arms race was uppermost on many peoples' minds. The article to which the picture referred talked about this headlong manic rush of the arms race. The picture was of a crowd of people running in terror and screaming "Hysteria is coming! Hysteria is coming!" It captured that sense of the tremendous power that can take over a group of people, like a mob that is suddenly terrified and tramples people to death. There's no one in that group who would wilfully kill anybody. But that mob spirit takes hold of us, and we all know what that is. The article was saying that's the sort of thing that was happening to our world and our governments. It's just a crazy, panicky, spirit--hysteria. That's another way of naming the demons, and Jesus says the Reign of God is close and there's no need for us to let the demons rule anymore.

Continuing verse one of Troeger's hymn: "At Christ's words the demon trembled, from its victim madly rushed, while the crowd that was assembled stood in wonder, stunned and hushed." There's a matter of sovereignty here. And it's a good kind of language. It does have that political side to it. The Reign of God is talking about a kind of authority, an ultimate or highest authority that stands opposed or against the powers in our world that would claim that sovereignty and to which we would give that kind of authority. Also, when I was involved in the nuclear arms disarmament movement in the eighties there was one time I remember writing a letter to the Department of National Defence asking some questions about, and challenging, Canada's engagement with

nuclear arms testing. The letter I received had one basic message. The answer was: "It's necessary; it's all necessary." And I was struck by how relative a term that was. Necessary for what? Necessary for the achievement of what kind of purpose? And so the question wasn't even being engaged whether it was necessary for the fulfillment of godly purpose or of demonic purpose. There is, then, a clash of sovereign authority, and this is very much what the New Testament is about. It's not about individuals in conflict, but about the powers who have got accustomed to reigning and then being challenged, being dethroned by the Reign of God.

Troeger's hymn goes on in the second verse: "Lord, the demons still are thriving in the gray cells of the mind: tyrant voices, shrill and driving, twisted thoughts that grip and bind, doubts that stir the heart to panic, fears distorting reason's sight, guilt that makes our loving frantic, dreams that cloud the soul with fright." And so Troeger talks very much about the interiority of our lives which can be understood both individually and very collectively. He talks about the doubts and fears and the guilt which become tyrant voices that speak from within and seem to take on a reality of their own. Even if we don't personify them they seem to have a real existence of their own. But they have no existence apart from us.

To begin with a simple illustration of that, I remember a song I used to sing years ago from the country blues tradition in the United States. This is a song called "Good Morning Blues" written by Huddie Ledbetter, if you know anything of that tradition. And there's an introductory note that says "Now this is a blues. Never was a white man had the blues--'cause nothin' to worry about. Now you lay down at night--you roll from side to side" and so on. It's very much out of the black culture of the U.S., and it's the simple words of blues melodies: "Good morning, Blues, Blues, how do you do? I'm doin' all right. Good morning, how are you?" A simple sort of greeting--the blues that are just hanging there and there you are again. The third verse goes: "I got up this morning, blues walkin' 'round my bed, up this morning, blues walkin' 'round my bed. Went to eat my breakfast, blues was all in my bread." It's the same thing; it's the way in which there's a spirit that can get hold of us that seems to have such a reality that we can almost see it around us and even be in dialogue with it.

That's a simple illustration; it's even got a touch of humour like that culture has. But it's only a matter of degree from that depth of fear and so on that gets hold of somebody that's expressed in the blues. It's only a matter of degree to go from there to where that gets expressed in violence. So the whole reality of domestic violence is like that too. It seems to have a demonic energy that takes hold of individuals, but it's got some kind of a hold in our culture. Even in our announcement sheet today: "Family Violence Action Society Interspousal Violence Program Update." There is a program for men called "Changing Ways," a program for women called "Choices," a program for kids called "Kids Choices," and then an anger management workshop. All of this is an attempt to speak those words of Christ: "The Reign of God is at hand." This demonic violence that seems to have a life of its own needs to be dethroned, and it can be dethroned only by the spiritual. The work that goes on in the workshops attempts to work on both levels--the external manifestations as well as the interior spirit.

We see that even more clearly, or it's named even more clearly, in the twelve-step processes like Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous where people start off

by admitting the helplessness in their lives, admitting that they can't solve their problems by themselves. It's alcohol or drugs that they are naming, but they're naming something beyond all that. They're naming that power, that demonic power that's got hold of them, and they admit that they are powerless. And then it's an acknowledgement, in whatever form they can acknowledge, of a higher power. And that's the beginning of the twelve-step process. That's exactly what Jesus is talking about when he says "the time has come; the Reign of God is at hand." The sovereign power of God is in the world and is a higher authority than all of these other powers that have usurped that sovereign authority in our lives.

Finally, in Troeger's last verse: "Silence, Lord, the unclean spirit in our mind and in our heart; speak your word that when we hear it, all our demons shall depart." So there's something about the simple declaration of the sovereignty of God that establishes the power of the Reign of God over the powers and the demons that claim us in our lives.

When I was involved, again in the peace and disarmament work in the 1980s, I went to the Ground Zero Centre in Bangor, Washington, and visited with Jim Douglas who was involved with the arms race and very much with engaging that spiritual depth of the inner power of this whole demonic thing. And I remember him saying that stopping the arms race is impossible on a purely political level. It was a very simple, clear, declaration in his mind, that on a purely political level stopping the arms race was impossible. There needed to be a spiritual power brought to bear because it was a spiritual power that was driving the arms race. It was a demonic power as if the whole nation, indeed the whole world, was caught up in that panic crowd mentality--"hysteria is coming!" He was working with the work of Ghandi who spoke of *satyagraha* which is "truth power." It was the power of non-violent resistance. It was in many different ways an attempt to rally and muster the spiritual energy and power that we have in our spiritual traditions, and to bring that energy to bear against the demon that was driving the world to the brink of destruction.

Jesus spoke with authority. The story from Mark starts with, and mentions twice, Jesus' talking in the synagogue and Capernaum which was catching people's attention because there was something different. What was different was that Jesus was speaking with authority in contrast to the scribes and the Pharisees. And then they saw him call out this demon, and the demon left the man. And they said "Whoa, who is this? He speaks with a kind of authority that even the demons obey him." And that's when his word began to spread throughout the world, spreading not just by people saying this is wonderful, but also spreading to the demonic powers who started to tremble and hate what he was saying. That's because the proper sovereign authority was being declared. And that's our work as the church today--to learn how to declare that time is up, the Reign of God is here. It's time to make a choice, and in our believing to transform the world.

I invite you to turn to Troeger's hymn at number 620 and join in singing "Silence, Frenzied, Unclean Spirit."

Transcribed and edited for publication by Sue and By Reesor