

Fourth Sunday after Epiphany
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Just then there was in their synagogue a person with an unclean spirit.

What are we to make of unclean spirits or what Mark often calls demons? They are not my thing. Neither has any appeal. I give them a wide berth, preferring a more benign exchange with the invisible world. I assiduously avoid all horror movies and books about vampires. They really give me the creeps.

But sometimes deep sorrow or rocking emotion catapults us into that world of strange spirits like tumbling through the back of the wardrobe into the world of Narnia. Or sometimes spirits come upon us in dreams. Or sometimes in the dreads that wake us in the night.

Jungian scholar James Hillman devotes a whole chapter of his book *The Force of Character to Waking at Night*.

So much goes on at night; not only dreams and reminiscing and prayers; but fears, those visiting demons who sit on the edge of your bed and recount your blunders and worries, and then fly off (as vampires do) once morning finally comes.

The early Christian monks who lived in desert caves tried to banish sleep altogether, since pagan powers were thought to approach pious

souls through dreams. To fend them off, the devout opened their eyes to the night to discriminate between the spirits.

This crowd of spirits that we call worry, self-castigation, anxiety, remorse, death terror, and erotic longing had names in the old world of the Mediterranean. For us they are psychological abstractions; but for the ancients they were personified figures, children of Nyx. (NYX the goddess of night.)

When you let them awaken you and receive their biting attacks and you are trying to decide if they are making any sense—this is hard work. An hour or two with the children of Nyx, wide-eyed in a dark room, can be exhausting.

Our restless mind is besieged by insights; lying sleepless, we develop a strange intelligence. Is this how the images of the dead communicate, how the ancestors instruct us? Keeping vigil to know the night was one way indigenous peoples had of gaining strength from the invisible world.

A demon that sits on the edge of *my* bed about once a year grips me, at night in what we now call a complex, what C. G. Jung called “those little devils,” the complexes that upset our best intentions as if they were a person. They can come, for instance, from a fear formed a long time ago, in grade school or high school. When we grapple with them, we know our anxiety is not rational and has no seating in reality but the anxious feeling will not release us. It can come to inhabit us. Perhaps

this is a product of that reptilian brain Lee Baucom talks about in our adult ed class.

Most nights I sleep very well but on those occasions when I awake in the a. m. with the dreads, I say the Lord's Prayer or begin reciting over and over the Jesus Prayer.

Lord Jesus Christ, son of God, have mercy on me.

But what I need, I realize, is the Jesus of Mark's gospel. A very human Jesus who will physically stand up to them, subdue the dreads and command them to leave, pull up stakes, decamp. Mark calls them not signs but works of power. Of power and authority. That's what *I* need in the middle of the night, power and authority.

This exorcism is Jesus' first act and the first of four exorcisms in Mark. *A person with an unclean spirit* (pneuma akatharton) has not a moral (even less a sexual) fault, but rather something that is opposed to the "holy." In the OT the command to be "holy" like God implies life, wholeness, and completeness; "unclean" suggests something that should not be, something out of place. The opposite of the realm of the holy is the realm of the demonic; hence the spirits there are "unclean." Physical defects and psychological aberrations, in Jesus' day, can make a person "unclean" in the sense of incomplete, imperfect, or out of order. When you and I are in the grip of a complex or digestive condition or serious memory problems or the pain of a bone grinding in its socket, we certainly feel out of order. We wouldn't call those conditions unclean, but we don't feel whole.

Jesus says to this unclean spirit, Be quiet. Literally “muzzle it.” These are imperatives. “Be quiet” and “leave” and the unclean spirit leaves immediately. Power and authority in the words of Jesus.

So how did people in the synagogue at Capernaum react to exorcism? At that time, the universe was perceived as being peopled by a wide variety of spirits, most of them threatening; in fact, humans occupied only a small part of the universe. Popular religion (mystery cults and healing shrines) in the Graeco-Roman period was very much concerned with liberation from these malevolent powers. Likewise, apocalyptic Judaism thought of the world as locked in a lethal struggle between God and the powers of evil. Therefore exorcism was not uncommon.

In Mark’s narrative, Jesus’ identity, announced earlier by a voice from heaven, is now shouted out by a spirit. Transcendent forces recognize him for who he really is. However human Jesus appears, he is also a figure of mystery and power. Through this first conflict with evil, Mark also stresses that Jesus is the stronger one, and here it is his word, not his touch, that is so powerful. No struggle, no exorcistic technique—Jesus commands with a word and they are gone.

Before Jesus, exorcism had been conducted by a trained practitioner who offered a diagnosis and administered a ritual using spoken formularies, amulets or compounds of substances resembling pharmacological recipes of the time. Jesus's approach seemed radical because it depended on spiritual authority alone.

What is important is the *source* of Jesus' astonishing activity, not the miracle itself. *If I drive out devils with the finger of God, it must be obvious that God's rule has come upon you.* In that moment God's rule is already present.

Although healing and exorcism are distinguished in the New Testament, they often appear in close association. Stories of exorcisms are followed by healings, like the next story in Mark, about Jesus restoring Peter's mother-in-law to health. In healings, Jesus used touch as we do with a laying on of hands.

In his time there was a close connection between illness and the influence of evil spirits. We have lost some of that sense of connection, perhaps to our detriment. Ideally, clinical care should treat both disease and illness,

Disease being a biological condition that we have historically treated with drugs, surgery, and other technological solutions. Illness, on the other hand, defines the context of a medical encounter, including the relationship between doctor and patient. Placebo research demonstrates that it is essential to consider both the science and the art of medicine

Up until several decades ago, physicians were interested in treating both disease and illness. However, at present modern professional health care tends to treat disease but not illness; whereas, in general, indigenous systems of healing tend to treat illness, but not disease.

We have some of the same questions today as in Jesus' time about disease and illness. And we certainly have questions about authority. Recent studies show that Different healers can have different effects on patients even when they perform an identical prospectively defined precise scripted interaction.

“Because,” as one person said about acupuncture “in the end, it isn't really about the needles. It's about the man.”

In other words, not just the procedure or pill but the person providing it. For each of us, which healer we pick to trust is different. For some of us, the doctor might be the man. Or woman.

For most of us Jesus is the man with the power, the one who restores the soul and renews a right spirit. It doesn't mean forsaking other forms of medical care. Jesus went about doing good. We can ask for him to do us good. Many of us here have "conditions" that dismay us, that need healing. We may depend on drugs. We may consider healings and exorcisms to be placeboes, good things not bad, which tests are proving can be as healing, in many cases, as drugs. And we may beseech Jesus directly to respond when we call upon him, to appear and lay his hand upon us. It is where we put our trust that is important, in what person or thing we consider to have strong authority in a day in which all authority is being questioned. We live in a time of splintering authority.

There is an album of gospel music called “Joyful Noise” that is outselling rock on Amazon. Gospel outselling rock. So, when you wake

up in the dark a. m. with the dreads, and you want to call on Jesus, you might sing one of them I just heard on NPR. It is called “Fix me, Jesus, fix me.”

For biological conditions, I rely on scientifically sharp physicians who also can be interested in my psychic life. I also seek help from a doctor of Oriental medicine and recently visited a homeopath for the first time in my life. For any condition that seems to have psychological components, I would consult with all of them but I’d also beseech Jesus to come to me, the Jesus Mark tells us about: the Jesus who will stand up to whatever terrorizes us. He can subdue the night dreads and command them to leave. Or we can ask a healing Jesus to put his hands on us, in the words of our Book of Common Prayer, *that he may lay his hands upon us, promising to uphold us and fill us with his grace, that we may know the healing power of his love.*

Amen