

Devotion, Week of August 11, 2024

Rev. Jeanne Simpson

I preached about an exorcism in Mark this past Sunday. We don't talk about that much in modern day society, and some commentators always rush to try to explain what was "really" wrong with the so-called demon-possessed person in those stories about Jesus. It appears to us today from last week's text in Mark 9 that this child appeared to have epilepsy, but it doesn't take away from the story of the possession and the fact that Jesus got rid of the disease or demon. Certainly to me, if someone has had seizures of that sort for years with all the thrashing about, foaming at the mouth, inability to speak, and collapses like the dead, it might as well be demon possession.

I asked my New Testament professor, Dr. Beth Johnson, as we were studying Mark, if she believed in demons. I thought for sure she would give me some modern-day explanation. But she didn't. She said she absolutely believes in demons, and she absolutely believes that there are true forces of evil in this world that God is always having to face. She believes Jesus was truly tempted by Satan, the evil one, in the wilderness, and she believes we see evidence in the world today of true evil. I think of Vladimir Putin, Idi Amin, Adolf Hitler, and others who seem to have no sense of humanity at all when it comes to the destruction of people. I think of these young men who take assault weapons and randomly shoot innocent victims. Or gang members who murder just to prove they are "men." You might call it mental illness – I call it evil. To me, they have become possessed by an evil spirit.

Now, I have a Masters Degree in Social Work, and I was taught that counseling and other therapy can help most people. But my professors also said that for true sociopaths, counseling does absolutely no good. They explain that these people have no conscience, no moral center, and nothing that a therapist can heal. All society can do is lock them up and keep others safe from them. If that's not demon possession, I don't know what is. So I try to acknowledge evil when I encounter it as just that – a force that is beyond simple human capabilities to deal with. It takes God and prayer, and if that doesn't work, caging the evil ones so that society is protected from them. We don't have Jesus any more to perform exorcisms in person, so we have to pray for God to get rid of evil some other way.

That's a hard reality. But perhaps it's time for us to call evil what it is, and not make excuses, like "he had a bad childhood," "his teachers never understood him," or "he just needs some good therapy to help him out of what must be a horrible depression." I would say we need to call on God to attack the evil and overpower it. The Bible tells us that is what God is always waiting to do, if we just ask. I know evil is out there, and I know that part of my task in my journey with Christ is to not let it get the best of me.

Jeanne