Dark Encounters

Mark 1:21-28

In the late sixties, there was an American Gothic soap opera (that’s daytime show for those of you who don’t watch General Hospital). It was called Dark Shadows. Does anyone remember Dark Shadows? It was the never-ending story of a vampire family, with Barnabas Collins as the 200-year-old vampire patriarch. The soap opera included the usual horror characters, you know, ghosts, witches, werewolves, warlocks, zombies (gotta have zombies). Known for ultra-melodramatics, it was recast into a movie starring Johnny Depp. The original show lasted five years, and was ultimately cancelled and replaced by Password. So much of Dark Shadows was cornball, it was hard to imagine it as being real. Which is why this morning’s scripture reading is a bit of a challenge at first glance.

In this new season of Epiphany, where we focus on the stories of how Jesus made himself manifest through healings and miracles, we find his earliest manifestation inside a synagogue in the form of a close encounter of the dark kind: with a demon, to be precise, a man possessed with an unclean spirit. It would be the first of many such encounters.

I say it’s a challenge because these kinds of encounters are not normally part of everyday conversation. I mean, really, when was the last time you had a conversation about demon possession?

“So, how’s that demon you were telling me about the other day? Did you ever get rid of it?

“No, not really. It’s still around, giving me all sorts of fits. In fact, it’s sitting on your head right now! Do something!!!”

I mean, really, how often does that happen?

We simply don’t talk about them we way they used to. One possible reason is because much of what was referred to as demons back in the days of Jesus are known by other names today, often by medical names that simply didn’t exist at the time. The world of Jesus’ day strongly believed in demons and devils in a way that is different than today. Back then, they sat on thrones, they hovered around cradles. They could eat. They could drink. They could beget children. Legend has it there were thought to be seven and a half million demons in Jesus’ day alone. Every person was thought to have ten thousand demons on their right hand and ten thousand demons on their left. The ritual of hand washing is associated with this belief. They lived in unclean places, in tombs, places where there was no clean water, in the desert. There was a demon of blindness, a demon of leprosy, a demon of the heart. They could transfer their evil onto others. They could give you the “evil eye,” and thereby turn all your good fortunes into bad. It was commonly believed that demons used certain animals for their malevolence; the snake, the bull, the donkey, the mosquito (the mosquito I can imagine).

In many ancient cemeteries of Jesus’ day, you could find skulls that had been “trepanned,” whereby a hole had been bored into them. In one such cemetery, out of 120 skulls, 6 had been trepanned. Furthermore, it was clear from the bone growth that the trepanning had been done during the person’s life. So, with the limited surgical skills available, that was no small operation. It was also clear that the hole was too small for any physical or surgical value; the one trepanned often wore the bone fragment as an amulet around the neck as a sign to all that having had this procedure, they were no longer a good host for demons since the demons could spill out of the skull.

Now, you might say that’s using your head! Or not. The point is, whether or not we operate under the same assumptions, people in the New Testament times firmly believed in demons, so intensely that many were prepared to undergo extreme measures to get rid of them.

The demonic. Even the word has a medieval sound to it, almost seems out of place today, except in fiction reading, horror movies, or day time shows. The bizarre, the grotesque. It brings to mind a question: If it is the product of an ancient world view, why then are we so fascinated by demons today? Some of the greatest box office hits of all time have to do with the demonic: Dracula, The Exorcist, Friday the 13th, Resident Evil, not to mention all the zombie movies. Seems that every time I turn on the TV, there’s another zombie movie. We satisfy our fascination with evil as long as it is on a movie screen or in a book or play. We can allow ourselves to be frightened without getting hurt.

But at the same time, we can feel it, sense it, the evil out there, can’t you? And it’s more than simply bad dreams, what’s under the bed, or things that go bump in the night. Truth is, we do not live in the same era as the first century. Our society’s world view has changed quite a bit. But the evil we see today is just as real, just as sinister and dark, by whatever name we call it. Bribery, nuclear threats, shootings, assassinations, murder, terrorist activity, opioid addiction, immorality and chronic incivility to name but a few.

We wonder what’s wrong with society, with people? How can so much wickedness fester and corrupt so many? And when we look closer at infamous faces, Adolf Hitler, Charles Manson, Osama Bin Laden, Timothy McVey, mass murderers, serial killers, each with their own dark story, we try to read their faces to make sense out of what they did. We try to piece together the puzzle of how they could do such terrible things. We try to profile criminal minds in the attempt to intervene before they commit other terrible acts or rid them from society. It would be so expedient if we could simply identify all of them and then box them up and ship them far, far away before they can do any harm. But it’s not that easy, is it.

And even if we could do that, there is a systemic nature to evil, that just when we think we’ve solved the root of one evil, another one breaks out, like a virus, a plague. It is as if there is a power, a force behind it, an evil spirit.

When I was stationed at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, I worked closely with the guards of the terrorists who were detained there. Now I firmly believe God can change the most stubborn heart, or I wouldn’t be in the ministry and we wouldn’t be here. I believe like you that with God, all things are possible. But I also know that there are some people, who have so hardened their minds and hearts as to be completely closed to the God who shows compassion to all. There are some people who are so filled with hate as to label whole groups of people who think differently, who believe differently as evil and fit for destruction. And what frightens me even more is when I look at our own society and see elements of this same mind thought, people in our own society who demonize entire groups of people because they don’t agree with them.

I realize then that the evil that was recorded long ago takes hideous shape in our own so called modern, technological, and sophisticated world.

And then, if we are honest, if we’re honest, and look deep inside, we may see a proverbial demon or two, pride, arrogance, addiction, unresolved anger that turns into bitterness and contempt, sloth, greed, verbal and physical abuse, envy, gossip, jealousy, to name a few.

But today’s sermon isn’t about us. It’s about this poor wretch of a human being in the synagogue at Capernaum, where Jesus is teaching. It’s about this guy.

So, there he is, sitting there. We don’t know the nature of the evil spirit, or how many there are. It cries out to Jesus, “What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth?” Who knows? Maybe it’s a whole legion of evil spirits who recognize Jesus that day. Whatever they are, they’ve been in this guy a long time.

When I read this passage, my first thought was how in the world did he get inside the synagogue?

I thought, maybe the man was planted there, a set-up for Jesus’ dramatic exorcism, like a tent revival fake healing service. But no, similar exorcisms by Jesus happened so frequently that if it were a hoax, he would be found out. The man wasn’t faking. He was possessed.

Perhaps everyone knew the man was possessed, but it was a liberal synagogue where anything goes, you think? No, I don’t think so either.

Perhaps it is simply that the man knew deep down that something was terribly wrong. Maybe there was enough of the sane man still there to know that he wasn’t right inside and desperately needed help, and that if there would be any help, it would have to come from a higher power. Perhaps he had been in the synagogue on previous occasions, only to be disappointed. He dared not tell anyone there. They would have thrown him out.

So here he is, with the ugly truth hidden deep inside, or just beneath the surface. Over the years, the man and his demon have come to know each other all too well. They don’t like each other, but they are familiar with the sick relationship.

He comes to the place of worship as he has countless times, listening for a word of grace, a word of hope, not sure anymore if he’ll hear it, but hoping against hope that he will. He has heard so many words, performed so many rituals. He aches to be freed from his living hell. It hasn’t happened yet. Maybe he’s grown cynical over the years. He looks around and sees familiar faces whose lives of quiet desperation he has also come to know. Maybe those who suspect the man has a problem ignore him, the way they ignore the darkness of their own lives when they come to worship, hoping nobody will say anything, thinking, if I’m unclean, you’re unclean. If you have something on me, I have something on you, so let’s keep it quiet.

Suddenly, he feels a tremor inside his own skin, something he’s never felt before. He hears words coming out of his mouth that he’s never heard before. It is the voice of his own demon crying out, recognizing the holiness and power and authority of the one facing him. Finally, the demon screams out one last act of defiance. The pews are wobbling, the rafters are jostling, the earth is shaking, the sun is breaking through and a whole new day dawns that morning in the middle of the synagogue, in the middle of worship. For with no magical incantation, with only the words spoken by the Son of God, the savior rips the demon out of the man, never to haunt him again. There was no fight, no back and forth struggle, but a simple and profound command, and the demon is gone, finally gone, completely gone, forever gone. The nightmare is over. In the darkness, a ray of light.

And this man, at long last, finds peace. For the first time in a long time, he is clean again. The spirit of God has entered the man, cup runneth over, now eager to praise God, to live for God, to love his neighbor, and at long last love himself for the child of God he is. All the self-loathing, all the despair is gone. He is a new man. Hallelujah!

You would think that this miracle in the synagogue resulted in everyone there coming to believe in Jesus as the long-awaited Holy One of God, but it didn’t. Jesus’ arrival in the world doesn’t immediately rid the world of evil, or darkness. There’s plenty of that to this day. What his arrival did was prevent the darkness from overcoming the light.

Hear the good news! However dark the world is for you, there is always the light. He gives you and me the promise that there will come an end to the present age of darkness, and as a sign of this promise, he gives us the light of his Son.

But here’s the crux. The light shines new with each generation. Each person must walk out of the darkness of their lives and into the light of God’s grace and goodness. Like the tormented man in the synagogue, each one of us must come to the Savior and confess whatever darkness lurks in the human heart, and place our faith in Him. None of us are grandfathered into the kingdom. We are reborn into it. The demons of the Dark Age have recognized him and have been defeated, but we must recognize Him and allow him to make us new, clean again.

The good news is, we don’t have to wait like that tormented man in the synagogue. Christ is with us! Amen? And all we have to do, all we really have to do, is humble ourselves, and be made clean. We need no rehearsed incantations, no spell binding prayers. All we need is the willingness to say, “Lord, have mercy on me.” And he will save. He will wash you clean. Amen!