

Sermon Outline

- Introduction
- Mark 3:22-30
 - Jesus Responds to Allegations
 - A House Divided
 - Binding the Strong Man
 - The Unforgivable Sin
 - Demons Used to Discuss Wider Topics
- Mark 5:1-20
 - The Story as Healing Narrative
 - Modern Parallels
 - Annelise Michel
 - Riverview Hospital
 - Jesus' Example of Freeing Others from Suffering
 - The Story as a Political Critique
 - The Setting
 - Military Language
- Conclusion/Application

Demons in the Gospel of Mark

Good morning on this Sunday where we continue on our journey into the Gospel of Mark. The previous sermon I delivered was on the topic of healing, and I tried to vocalize some questions that I have in regards to healing narratives, and hopefully found some ways of applying the text to our lives. I also left some questions unanswered because it was a complex topic, and if you did not like that I apologize because this week our topic is demons. I promise one of these days I will find a perfectly straightforward text that I am an expert in, and have no questions about...if such a passage exists.

Introduction

The scriptures this morning leave us with a lot of questions. In the first text, we have Jesus' strange parable about binding the strong man, as well as mention of "the unforgivable sin". Was anyone else terrified when they were younger that they would accidentally commit the unforgivable sin? I sure was. In the second one, we are told about an exorcism that leads to the rapid production of bacon. Jesus should have sold a patent to Schneiders. This exorcism is a strange story and was featured in our youth series "Weird Bible Stories" where hopefully the youth were entertained, while learning a bit of critical thinking when it comes to confusing parts of the Bible. After each Weird Bible Story I had them create a singular phrase to sum up the story and for this one I believe they came up with "Suicidal Demons Love Bacon". Perhaps that should have been my sermon title. Hopefully we can take something meaningful from these two pieces of scripture about demons.

Because for many of us today the concept of demons is either foreign, feels irrational, or maybe makes us feel fearful. I remember hearing about demons when I was younger, through reading my Bible, through lessons at camp, and through discussions with other people. As someone already prone to nightmares, I was truly terrified for years. I was worried there were demons in my house, that demons were controlling my dreams, and I was worried one day a demon would possess me. I do not want folks to leave this sermon fearful. I also don't ever want to fearmonger people towards Jesus. Surely our message as a church can be more holistic than "Follow Jesus or the demons will get you". So instead, let's look at how Jesus tried to liberate people. From political, physical, financial, mental and spiritual distress.

Mark 3:22-30 Jesus Responds to Allegations

The text in Mark chapter 3, is Jesus' response to the claims that he is actually working for Satan. On both sides of the eight verses in our bulletins this morning, there are accounts of Jesus' family, coming to get him because he is crazy. This section seems to show how Jesus stands up to his detractors. People want to write him off as crazy or evil. Calling him demonic is a way of distancing Jesus and discrediting him.

This isn't terribly uncommon in our world. We can all probably think of a time where labels are used to discredit the validity of another person's view. Ched Meyers wrote "Binding the Strongman" during the Cold War, and he compares calling Jesus demonic, to calling someone a communist at that time. The word "groomer" is currently misappropriated to refer to people in the LGBTQ community, in an attempt to demonize them. Terms like hick or redneck might be used to discredit someone's knowledge of the larger world. Calling someone a neanderthal might be a quick label to discredit their intelligence on any given topic. I could go on, but there are a lot of labels I do not want to repeat in church, but I see many in the divided world we live in, and particularly on the internet which removes any notion of nuance. The point being, is that quick labels are still used to vilify anyone who is perceived to be the opposite to us. This is the type of rhetoric that Jesus was up against, when the scribes said he was in cahoots with Beelzebul.

Jesus responds rather aggressively with three main points.

1. A House Divided

He first points out the foolishness of their logic. If he was working for Satan, why would Satan's influence in the world be diminishing? That simply does not make sense. How can the good that is happening be equated with evil? By using this small parable of houses and kingdoms, Jesus highlights how foolish it is to call him demonic, when he is the one revolting against the powers that be.

2. Binding the Strongman

Jesus then uses a second parable to tell the scribes who he really is. Jesus interestingly likens his mission to someone breaking and entering. In picking this imagery it Jesus seem to be saying, I am not a friend of Satan, but I am certainly not a friend of the empire either. Jesus identifying himself as the robber would upset the law-and-order sensibilities of the scribes. Ched Meyers believes that Jesus represents the stronger one, and the strong man he has bound up is the scribal establishment (Meyers, 167). Jesus saw himself as a liberator, who would free the captives from the oppression of the powerful. Jesus' plunder in this imagery, is the freedom of the people.

3. The Unforgiveable Sin

In all the reading that I did, I found the consensus to be that the unforgiveable sin, is unforgiveable because it is an active, continual denial in some way. So if you are like me, you can release that tension in your shoulders, because you didn't commit the unforgivable sin by accident when you were a kid. This statement is not one of judgement for a certain mistake, but rather Jesus' responding to the scribes, after they accused him of evil. Jesus is saying that demonizing the good things happening- healing, reintegration into society, liberation from burdens and spiritual wellness- these things are good and to say otherwise is to be unreceptive to goodness. Ched Meyers sums it up well:

“Thus, by the close of his defense, Jesus has turned the tables completely upon his opponents: it is they who are aligned against god's purposes. To be captive to the way things are, to resist criticism and change, to brutally suppress efforts at humanization- is to be bypassed by the grace of God” (Meyers, 167).

Demons Used to Discuss Wider Topics

In this first text, Jesus responds to the allegations that he is on the side of evil. The scribes use labels to discredit him, and Jesus in turn claims himself as a liberator of those held captive by worldly struggles, and the oppression of the empire. Jesus then notes that equating other people's freedom with evil, is what is truly wrong. In our first look at the demon discussion, Jesus uses the belief in demons as a launching point about the world around him. While we learn very little about the particulars of demons, we see that their expulsion was indicative of Jesus' larger ministry. Essentially, the discussion about demons, was about more than Jesus' encounters with spiritual forces. Because this is about more than spiritual beings, even if we struggle to comprehend demons, there are still things to take away from these discussions.

Mark 5:1-20

The second piece of scripture from this morning has Jesus in action, casting out demons. As I said before this story could be labeled weird, confusing, scary or shocking. Similar to the Mark 3 passage, this story is about more than just demons. Again, the exorcism of demons can be used to launch a bigger conversation about the world around them. I will try to outline two interpretations or ways of looking at this story. First

as a discussion about demons and afflictions, and second looking at how this story might be used to distribute a more elaborate message.

This Story as a Healing Narrative

Upon entering a new region, Jesus finds himself face to face with a demoniac. We are given some additional information about the man's affliction. The man lives out in the graveyard, howling, committing self harm, and apparently breaking free from any shackles that hold him. Jesus casts out the many demons, sending them into some nearby pigs. The pigs jump off a cliff, and the locals urge Jesus to leave, while the now healed man begs Jesus to come along with him.

This story is rather frightening. Halloween is approaching, and you can almost picture this scene being part of a horror movie. A low fog blowing between the tombs as a man howls at the full moon. There are many fearful questions that can come up when we read this story. How did this man become demon possessed? Can that happen to me? How did the man have supernatural strength to tear apart the chains?

The text does not give us the answers to these questions, because the focus is on Jesus' power to liberate people of whatever is oppressing them. Jesus casts out the many demons with ease, and the man is restored to his right mind. When we looked at healing in Mark's gospel, we found that Jesus was able to bring people back into community by healing them. We also found that we were able to do the same thing by making our world more accessible and removing certain assumptions about the nature of disease, illness, and disability.

Modern Parallels

If we apply similar reasoning to this passage, we may conclude that Jesus is liberating the Gerasene man from severe mental illness and isolation. Similar to the woman with the flow of blood, this man in addition to his troubling condition is utterly unclean. He dwells among the tombs- being around the dead is an unclean act, is clearly ill, and lives near pigs which were considered to be unclean animals by any Jewish readers. The man keeps breaking free from the restraints put on him, which begs the question who keeps restraining this poor man in isolation. Personally this text reads to me like a man being cast aside due to mental torment. Whether this mental torment was caused by demons, as Jesus' followers believed, or if this is a pre-scientific understanding of mental illness we cannot be certain. If we call into question the treatment of this man, we may find many parallels to our world today. I would like to address these parallels with two modern events that question the physical and spiritual treatment of folks who may present themselves similarly to the Gerasene Demoniac.

Annelise Michel

Annelise Michel was 16 years old when she first experienced an episode that left her in a trance-like state. This condition progressed, and was accompanied by

convulsions as well, that led some family members to conclude she was demon possessed. From a medical point of view, her neurologist

“Diagnosed her with temporal lobe epilepsy, a disorder that causes seizures, loss of memory, and experiencing visual and auditory hallucinations. Temporal lobe epilepsy can also cause Geschwind syndrome, a disorder marked by hyperreligiosity.”

Annelise took medication for her epilepsy and enrolled in university. However, the medication did not seem to help her, and her condition worsened. Due to the nature of her illness, she was prone to what some called “religious delusions”. Both Annelise and her family concluded that they needed treatment outside of medicine, and they turned to the church for help, and began to disregard modern medical interventions. Over a period of 10 months, she had 67 exorcisms performed on her, lasting up to 4 hours where she was often restrained or on her knees praying for extended periods of time. This took a considerable toll on her physical health. As her mental state worsened, she stopped eating, and she eventually passed away from malnutrition and dehydration at the age of 23. Her parents and the two priest who performed the exorcisms were charged with negligent homicide. In an article, Gabe Paoletti makes this conclusion regarding the conflicting understandings.

“While she may be a source of inspiration for some religious people, the story of Anneliese Michel is not one of spirituality triumphing over science, but of people who should have known better than allowing a mentally-ill woman to die. It’s the story of people projecting their own beliefs, hopes, and faith onto a woman’s delusions, and the price that was paid for those beliefs.”

It is not hard to see the parallels between how Annelise Michel was treated, and how the Gerasene demoniac was treated. Both were isolated without regard for their needs. Whether you see demons as a tangible spiritual entity, or as a symbol of other illness, the fact remains that we need to ensure the well being of others. Whether we believe them to have a demon, or temporal lobe epilepsy.

Riverview Hospital

When I reread this story in preparation for this sermon, the details of a man howling amongst tombs, harming himself, and being subjected to restraints reminded me of the history of homelessness in the Downtown East side of Vancouver. Particularly, the complicated history of Riverview Hospital. Riverview Hospital started out as an Asylum for people suffering from various mental illnesses. Eventually, the hospital grew and with its growth after the war some aspects of care began to deteriorate. At the time, these large institutions were more common, and most practiced several therapies that we find appalling today. Within the larger scale institution, it is often easier for abusers to get away with their wrongdoings. CTV writes this in their article recounting Riverview Hospital’s history:

“Many people who were detained at Riverview in the past identify as survivors – they were there against their will and they were not allowed to leave,” said Laura Johnston, legal director of Health Justice. “Riverview used mechanical and chemical restraints and many other practices that were considered controversial and criticized even at the time they were being used.”

As the science surrounding Mental Illness improved, treatment improved, and people were able to access anti-psychosis medication. Many people were released back into the community.

“By the 1980s, the hospital was actively being downsized for two reasons: a belief patients belonged in community rather than warehoused and out of sight, and the government deciding it was financially better as well.”

While folks were on the right track in believing that patients belonged outside of these large institutions, the problem was the lack of community support they received upon leaving. To summarize, you have all these people suffering from various mental health disorders, taken and put in this large facility. Many of these people were traumatized by their time in this institution because of the abuse they experienced, and also just being locked away for so much of their life. They are then released into the community due to budget cuts and medical advancements, with no community supports or help. Forced to try and make it in the world while suffering from mental illness and trauma. Many people released from Riverview found a new home in downtown Vancouver, living on the streets, and coping with their trauma through substance use. Today these same people are often demonized, isolated from larger society, and treated poorly.

I see a lot of parallels between the Gerasene demoniac and the folks I met on the Downtown East side of Vancouver. That is not because I think that homeless folks are demonic with demons inhabiting their bodies. I see parallels because Jesus went to an isolated, often restrained individual, who struggled with self harm and liberated him. If we are supposed to follow in Jesus’ footsteps, I think we need to hope for similar liberation and healing. I think we need to ask, who are the people suffering like this man, regardless of why they are suffering in that way.

Jesus’ Example of Freeing the Suffering

Demons can be very confusing and they are not in our day to day understanding of how the world works. In Jesus’ exorcism, he showed his heart for someone suffering from isolation, physical restraints, self harm, and mental distress. To be like Jesus is to go to those we see in a similar condition. They don’t have a demon dwelling within them, but their suffering is the same. In the stories of Annelise Michel and Riverview Hospital, we have modern examples of how we can do better for those who have struggles that present in a similar way to the Gerasene Demoniac.

This Story as a Political Critique

In addition to using this passage as inspiration for helping the marginalized, this passage can also be seen as critique of the political powers around Jesus at the time. Ched Meyers adopts this interpretation, and it is true that Mark retells this event using political and military language. There are several clues that Mark is using demons as a larger talking point.

The Setting

First, the setting of this story is important. The details included highlight that Jesus is now in gentile territory. “The demoniac’s dwelling among the tombs and the presence and role of the pigs symbolize impurity according to the Jewish cultural code” (Meyers, 191). The author of Mark states that this event takes place in the region of the Gerasenes. The city of Gerasa was not a coastal city, and is in fact thirty miles away from the seaside area implied in this story (Meyers 190). The gospel writer could have described the area simply as the Decapolis, an area with ten cities, and this broader more general title would have been better suited (Meyers 190). Meyers however suggests that Mark uses Gerasa to describe the location because of the history of this area. In one of the many Galilean uprisings, the Galileans drowned Herodian nobles in the lake (Meyers 191). Eventually, they were subjected to brutal retaliation at Gerasa, with Vespasian sending a calvary that killed a thousand men, took their families captive, plundered the village, before burning everything to the ground (Meyers, 191). Meyers concludes

“In light of this Mark’s choice of “the region of the Gerasenes” as a site of symbolic confrontation with the ‘legions’ takes on new and specifically political meaning” (Meyers, 191).

The Military Language

This introduces us to the second clue that Mark is telling this story in a way that is critical of the empire around him. The military language used to tell the story. The following words and phrases Mark uses invoke military imagery in their original language.

Legion: Using the word Legion during the Roman rule, would have immediately made people think of a division of Roman soldiers. Roman legions were well known in the area, and people were familiar with this term.

“He Dismissed Them”: This resembles a military command at the time.

“Charged”: When the pigs charge into the lake, the word used suggests troops rushing into battle

It is for these reasons (and many others that I struggle to understand), that Ched Meyers believes Mark uses this story to make claims not just about Jesus’ opposition to spiritual forces, but also to political forces. Jesus is standing up against the dark powers

of the world, whether they are demons or soldiers. A truly remarkable feat, as he stands up to the forces of Satan and Empire, without the use of violence.

Conclusion/Application

I hope that as we leave this service today, people do not feel a fear about demons. Not like the one that I had growing up, and many other people have had. Diving into the world of the gospels can feel scary, because it sometimes looks very different from our world today. I would suggest there are many different ways of understanding the confusing aspects of the world around us. For some demons are a part of that understanding, and for others it is not. Regardless of how we understand the bad, difficult, and confusing things around us, the point is not to stir up fear. In fact it is quite the opposite. The focus of these stories about demons is never on the demons themselves. It is not a cautionary tale, as we never hear a back story about how they became afflicted by demons. The point of these stories is the liberation and healing that Jesus provided. I personally think we miss the point when we focus on the scary aspects of these discussions, because it is clear that no force can stand up to Jesus.

We might understand these forces in different ways, or even in multiple ways. Jesus triumphing over the spiritual monsters and freeing people. Jesus healing others from unexplainable mental illnesses and disease. Jesus providing a guide to freedom from the political forces around. It can be hard to understand these stories, at least for me. So perhaps it is best to focus on what is easy to understand. That Jesus declares himself as one who liberates us from spiritual, mental, emotional, and political distress. If we are to follow in the footsteps of Jesus, how might we do the same? How can we free people from whatever is binding them? Physical, or spiritual or both. May we go hoping for a more free world, genuinely taking care of those who are bound. Amen.

Works Cited

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