

**"Demons?"**  
The Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany  
4 February 2024  
Trinity+St. Peter's Episcopal Church  
San Francisco, California

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Isaiah 40:21-31  
Psalm 147:1-12, 21c  
I Corinthians 9:16-23  
St. Mark 1:29-39

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**Where did the demons come from?**

Elaine Pagels, in her book Adam, Eve and the Serpent, opens our eyes to a cultural understanding that might help us as we deal with the Gospel for today. She writes:

*"Even those who resisted pagan culture had been deeply affected by it; yet they held to the customs that distinguished and separated them from their pagan neighbors."*

Her observation is of Jews living at the time of Jesus and the Roman occupation of the Levant. Even so, what she says of that period of time would obtain for Jews living before that period. We can see the influence of Canaanite and Egyptian literature in the psalms, and the influx of Persian and Mesopotamian ideas in the description of events and characters in the Pentateuch. The forced Hellenization of Israel during the Seleucid period, (when Israel was ruled by the kings descended from one of Alexander the Great's generals) this forced Hellenization bore fruit long after the Maccabean revolt, and the restoration of Jewish values. Just as American/European culture has described the world in which we live, Hellenic culture and literature was infused in the cultures of the Mediterranean.

Demons in Greek literature were either good or bad, but not exclusively evil, and the notion of demons out of Mesopotamia was that they were the bringers of illness, and threats to health. It is in this guise that we see demons in the Gospels. They bring illness, madness, and an evil possession (which we recognize today as either mental or physical illness). Aligned with this understanding of "illness" and "health" was the whole Jewish concern with purity. Pagels describes the Essenes, the rebels who left the evils of urban life in Jerusalem and the Temple to form a "'pure' community in desert caves overlooking the Dead Sea." Perhaps that is what drove Jesus and his followers to the wilderness to pray and to be restored, to purify himself and the disciples from the demons of the prevalent culture. It might be helpful for us to really understand and review the images that come to our minds when we hear of these entities in the Scriptures and understand their true nature and provenance. Even in our own time we have had spiritual leaders who have headed to the wilderness to purify themselves. Thomas Merton comes to mind. With that understanding of demons, let us tackle today's Gospel.

## Jesus and the demons in Mark.

Mark delivers to us a Jesus who is deeply involved with the realities of life. In our reading from the Gospel today, Jesus is concerned with spiritual and physical health. He is the healer, and as Mark and his time would have it, he is the exorcist. I would hope we would move beyond the idea of possession by evil to the idea of health and healing in this pericope. Mark has his own reasons for representing the demons with the capacity to recognize and announce Jesus' name and status. He wants all of creation, both good and bad, to recognize Jesus as one sent from God for our healing. For our purposes, in our time, it is important to see Jesus here addressing human need – to free them from the oppression that health issues bring. The world in which Jesus operated assigned these difficulties to demons, an idea that the culture had imported from other cultures. It isn't helpful for us to have this same notion. What is helpful is to see Jesus besieged for his healing power and way with people. It is a call to us to do the same. We need to recognize the need that is around us. The disciples tell Jesus, *"Everyone is searching for you."* We need to hear that in our time, and in all the situations in our lives.

One Sunday, a young woman come into the services at Saint Mark's in Berkeley and stationed herself at the Baptismal Font at the foot of the aisle up to the altar. She demanded to be baptized, "I want water!" and she demanded attention. Was she possessed? No, she was in dire need of healing, however. The question that pulsed through all of our minds at the time was, "What can we do to help her." What wasn't going to help was "magic prayer." What wasn't going to help was denial of the situation. What wasn't going to help was our own fear. What was going to help were the gifts of healing and expertise that God had given some to care for people such as this. And so the liturgy continued as a few people ministered to her until she could be delivered to mental health professionals. It left me wondering why my skills were not up to the task of helping her.

The need that is expressed in Mark is seen and literally felt in the press of people, *"And all the whole city gathered around the door."* Does this need sound familiar to you? Do you see it on the streets of your town? Did last Sunday's experience with the person who created a stir at the doors of the church speak to you of this need. This reading leads us to understand and realize the gifts of healing that God has already put into our hands, and the need for us to make those gifts available to those who need it. "Bless me, Father", a man cried as I crossed Shattuck Avenue in Berkeley one day. My body wanted to move quickly away, but the Spirit, pulled me to the man and put words of blessing into my mouth. He was moved by my blessing words, and then went quietly on his way. Such incidents happened with some frequency during my time in Berkeley. Yes, casting out the demons of misunderstanding and being over sheltered -that was what Jesus wanted me to do, wanted us to do. Yes, our hands, God's work!

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