

# “Demons, Demons, Everywhere”

Mark 5:1-20; Luke 4:31-41 <sup>1</sup>

Well, what in the world did you think when you saw the background of this week’s PowerPoint and the title for this sermon? I’ll bet we could tell some interesting stories about the images, memories, and associations that the words “demons” and “demonic” conjure up!

You may be wondering where in the world this topic came from and why we’re looking at it today. The answer to that is pretty straightforward: this is a “pre-Halloween” sermon.



I imagine that you know that November 1<sup>st</sup> is observed as “All Saints’ Day” by many Christians in western Christianity. The celebration, also known as “All Hallows” or “the Feast of All Saints,” is observed on the first Sunday after Pentecost in eastern Christianity, and in both cases, it is celebrated as a feast in honor of all the saints, known and unknown.

In the Catholic and Orthodox churches, there is a fairly defined list of persons recognized as “saints”—persons whose lives have been spiritually exemplary in many ways. Baptists and other evangelicals don’t have a corresponding category of “super-spirituality,” and don’t even use the word “saint” very much. For example, while the words “saint” or “saints” occur 98 times in the King James Version and 81 times in the English Standard Version, they don’t appear even once in the New International Version. The NIV generally uses “God’s holy people” where the others use “saints.”

All Saints’ Day is actually the middle day of a three-day feast, or “triduum,” which begins with All Hallows’ Eve and ends with All Souls’ Day. The season is one of remembering the dead, especially Christian martyrs and saints, as well as the faithful departed from every era.

While the idea of All Hallows’ Eve was originally—and still is officially—a time of fasting and prayer and gratefully remembering the continuing influence of departed believers, it didn’t take too much for thoughts of darkness and death to become twisted into something not Christian at all. So it was that during the last several hundred years, at least, All Hallows’ Eve—like Christmas, Easter, and other Christian festivals—lost much of its spiritual focus, and “Halloween” became a night of pagan revelry more than anything else.<sup>2</sup>

With All Saints’ Day commemorating holy lives, All Hallows’ Eve began in the popular imagination to commemorate lives, powers, and spirits that are anything but holy, and a great deal of money is being made through that negative transformation. So it is, then, that a sermon on this particular Sunday might turn our attention to demons and the demonic.

There are many today who regard talk about demons as archaic, pre-scientific, and muddle-headed; and there are quite a few others who claim to see “demons, demons, everywhere.” Our quest this morning is to examine some of the evidence about these matters.

---

<sup>1</sup> A sermon by David C. Stancil, Ph.D., delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, Maryland on October 27, 2013.

<sup>2</sup> In a similar way, Shrove Tuesday, the day of fasting and prayer just before the beginning of Lent, became twisted into Mardi Gras; the CHRISTmas Story was upstaged by Santa Claus; and Resurrection Sunday was diluted by The Easter Bunny. Satan knows his craft.

The words “demon” or “demons” occur 86 times in the New International Version of the Bible. Eighty-four of these references are in the New Testament, and 71 of these (85%) have to do with Jesus. Jesus himself and the Bible as a whole treat Satan and demonic powers as if they are absolutely real.

All three Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) record the encounter presented in our text, and there are several possibilities we should consider as we examine those records. In the first place, Jesus’ affirmation of the reality of demons could have been due to His ignorance of psychological realities that we now understand more fully. That possibility doesn’t square well with Jesus’ omnipotence as God in human flesh.

Second, Jesus could have known that demons are imaginary, but “played along” with the superstitions of His own day in order to make a point. That possibility doesn’t square well with Jesus’ affirmation that He is Truth (John 14:6). With those possibilities rejected, that leaves consideration of the possibility that Jesus was affirming something that is truly real.

The Gospels record eight different occasions when Jesus exorcised, or expelled, demons from people. On three of these occasions, Jesus seems to have healed many people from demon possession;<sup>3</sup> the other five occasions involved the exorcism of particular persons: a woman, two men, a boy, and a girl.<sup>4</sup>

C.S. Lewis wrote that “There are two equal and opposite errors into which our race can fall about the devils. One is to disbelieve in their existence. The other is to believe, and to feel an excessive and unhealthy interest in them. They themselves are equally pleased by both errors and hail a materialist or a magician with the same delight.”<sup>5</sup> We do well to find a middle way between these poles.

As you know, my own vocational journey has included working as a pastoral psychotherapist for ten years and teaching the psychology of religion on the graduate level for five years. Although I’m somewhat rusty in these areas at this point, I am familiar with multiple personality disorder and with the psychosomatic dynamics that lie beneath many of our afflictions and diseases. Virtually all of these situations would have been considered “demon possession” in prior eras, but we understand them differently now, and our better understanding facilitates better care. I’m not one who looks for demons under every rock.

At the same time, I’ve had personal experience with demonic powers on at least four occasions, in four different cities, over a period of more than forty years. While it’s possible that there are alternative explanations for three of these experiences, the fourth and most recent experience seems inexplicable in any other way. With all as this background, then, let’s look at this biblical encounter once more, this time as Mark recorded it. You’ll find the story in Mark 5:1-20.

What we see here is truly an awesome spectacle. Jesus and the disciples have just crossed the Sea of Galilee, during which transit Jesus has quieted a fierce storm simply by speaking to the wind and the waves. As they watched the storm dissipate instantly at Jesus’ word of command, the disciples asked among themselves, “**Who is this?** *Even the wind and waves obey him!*” (Mark 4:41).

When they arrived at the other side of the lake, they were in a Gentile territory known as “the land of the Gerasenes.” Before Jesus was even out of the boat, a naked man who had lived in a cemetery for a long time ran from among the tombs to challenge Jesus. The man shrieked

<sup>3</sup> Matthew 12:15-71; Luke 6:17-26, 7:18-35, and parallels.

<sup>4</sup> Luke 4:31-37, 8:1-3, 26-39; Mark 7:24-30, 9:14-29, and parallels.

<sup>5</sup> C.S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters* (1941; Old Tappan, NJ: Revell, 1976), p. 17.

and fell to the ground, screaming, “*What do you want with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? In God’s name don’t torture me!*” (Luke 8:28).

The Bible says that “*this man lived in the tombs, and no one could bind him anymore, not even with a chain. For he had often been chained hand and foot, but he tore the chains apart and broke the irons on his feet. No one was strong enough to subdue him. Night and day among the tombs and in the hills he would cry out and cut himself with stones*” (Mark 5:3-5). This guy doesn’t sound like anybody I’d want to be in the same county with, much less face to face with!

There are a number of interesting things about this encounter. First of all, this is the only recorded trip that Jesus made to this territory, so there’s no reason to think that this man had any ordinary information about who Jesus was. Even more interesting, the man addressed Jesus not simply by His name, but as “*Jesus, Son of the Most High God.*”

Now when ordinary folk spoke to Jesus, they referred to Him as “Lord,” “Teacher,” “Son of David,” or “Master.” Those possessed by demons, however, called Him “the Holy One of God,” “the Son of God,” or “Son of the Most High God.” While He walked among us, Jesus cloaked His eternal majesty and power in human flesh, but the spirits knew who He was. They knew that He had come to break their power over human spirits, and they feared Him.

As Jesus commanded the spirit to release the man, He asked, “*What is your name?*” The question was not for Jesus’ own knowledge, but so that onlookers—and we after them—would understand what was really happening. The spirit replied, “*My name is Legion, for we are many*” (Mark 5:9; a legion was the largest unit of the Roman Army, consisting of between 3,000 and 6,000 soldiers).

The demons acknowledged Jesus’ authority over them, and they begged Him not to send them into the Abyss, the “*eternal fire prepared for the Devil and his angels*” (Matthew 25:41).<sup>6</sup> While that fire will indeed be their destiny at the end of time, since that time had not yet come, Jesus granted their request and allowed them to enter a herd of pigs, which ran over the cliff and was destroyed.

Why did Jesus do such a thing? Why destroy the pigs? The truth is that we don’t know. One possible answer might be that Jesus wanted to give tangible evidence that the demons had actually left the man, and to reveal that their purpose had been to destroy him even as they destroyed the pigs. But the point of the story wasn’t the pigs, of course. The point was that when the townspeople ran out to see what was happening, they saw the man “*sitting there, dressed and in his right mind*” (Mark 5:15).

Now let’s turn back to our text in Luke 4 for a minute. Verses 31-37 give a second account of a man whom Jesus freed from demon possession. The dynamics in this situation were very similar to the scene by the Sea of Galilee, ending with this exclamation from those who witnessed the exorcism: “*What words these are! With authority and power he gives orders to impure spirits and they come out!*” *And the news about him spread throughout the surrounding area.*”

Verses 38-41 of Luke 4 tell a third story. Here we’re told that Peter’s mother-in-law was “*suffering from a high fever.*” Standing by her bedside, Jesus “*bent over her and rebuked the fever, and it left her. She got up at once and began to wait on them.*” As with the storm and with the demon possessed men, Jesus expelled the fever with a clear, simple word of command. Jesus cited no authorities and quoted no experts. The Power was not in a spell, a formula, a magic chant, or an elaborate ritual. The Power was in Jesus, whose voice was the Voice of God!

<sup>6</sup> Also “*the Abyss*” (Luke 8:31-32; Revelation 9:1-2, 11).

It's interesting to note that not only did the fever disappear instantly, but Peter's mother-in-law was able to get up at once and prepare dinner. If you've ever had a high fever, you know that even when the fever breaks, you're "limp as a wet rag" for a long time afterward. But when Jesus spoke the word of healing, both the problem and its normal after effects were removed.

As evening came and the Sabbath ended, the villagers brought their sick to Jesus. The Bible says, *at sunset, the people brought to Jesus all who had various kinds of sickness, and laying his hands on each one, he healed them. Moreover, demons came out of many people, shouting, "You are the Son of God!" But he rebuked them and would not allow them to speak, because they knew he was the Messiah.*

Well, we've looked briefly at the stilling of a fierce storm, several exorcisms, and a dramatic physical healing. What are we to make of all this?

It seems to me that, while most of what passes itself off as sorcery, witchcraft, or psychic phenomena is no more than fakery, the Bible does teach us that there is frightening and dangerous reality beneath the veneer of such activities. I submit to you that the universe is far stranger than we have imagined, and that its most significant dimensions are not perceptible to our ordinary senses.

Beyond this, it's important to realize that many of the dangers that we face may not appear to be evil. Demons never appear in reality as they appear in the background to this presentation. If we've learned anything at all from the war on terror, we've learned that things are not always as they seem. And in neither case can we say that we weren't warned. The Bible has long cautioned that Satan himself can masquerade as an angel of light (John 8:44; 2 Corinthians 11:14).

The Bible warns us that "*your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour*" (1 Peter 5:6), and that "*our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms*" (Ephesians 6:12). Our adversaries know our weaknesses—all of them—and they use them shamelessly to their own advantage.

While these enemies need little help in their quest to destroy us, there are many ways in which we can make ourselves more susceptible to their power. There are many activities that present themselves as harmless fun, but that actually make us more vulnerable to the powers of Darkness.

As Moses warned long ago (Deuteronomy 18:10-12), those who toy with fortune-telling, mediums, sorcery, wizarding, witchcraft, and the like are toying with power beyond what they have imagined—or really wish to face. Other openings that lie on the borders of Darkness include *Ouija* boards, astrology, horoscopes, games like *Dungeons & Dragons*, and similar activities.

Dr. Merrill Unger warned that those who ignore God's warnings and enter these forbidden realms may indeed discover that they receive powers of clairvoyance, precognition, healing, divination, or the ability to produce other spiritistic phenomena, but that demonic "subjection and oppression are the inevitable penalties to all who traffic in the realm of evil supernaturalism."<sup>7</sup>

There was a man in one of the units I served as a Navy Chaplain who was very involved in *Dungeons & Dragons*, and who freely—though unhappily—spoke about the dark powers that

---

<sup>7</sup> Merrill Unger, *Demons in the World Today: A Study of Occultism in the Light of God's Word* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale, 1971), p. 25.

oppressed his life because of that activity . . . yet he found himself captive to them and was unable to break free. Christians are not immune to these influences, and Christians who expose themselves to occult powers lose interest in the things of God and bring upon themselves many sorrows that were never God's intent.

Today, as in biblical times, the only cure for and the only release from any form of demonic influence or satanic control comes through the power of Jesus. Jesus defeated Satan in His own experiences of temptation in the wilderness, and in His resurrection Jesus triumphed over the powers of Darkness finally and absolutely (Colossians 2:15). Beyond this, Jesus has made His own power over these spirits available to those who follow Him (Matthew 10:1; Mark 3:15, 6:7; Luke 9:1).

Ephesians 6 tells us that God provides spiritual armor for us "*so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. . . so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand*" (vv. 11-13). We're not going to go over all of that armor this morning, but it's worth noting that the only offensive weapon God gives us for this conflict is "*the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God*" (v. 17).

If we recognize that God's Word is an offensive weapon provided by God for our protection, we'll also understand that **Bible study is not for wimps: it's for warriors**. Only if we know the Bible well will we be able to recognize when the Bible being used to camouflage Darkness rather than to serve the Kingdom of Light. Only if we know the Bible well, internalizing it through much reading and study, will we be able to deploy its power in spiritual combat. And knowing the Bible well will only help us if we're willing to do what it tells us to do and to refrain from doing what it tells us not to do.

From the very beginning, evil has been a matter of the will. That's how Satan and his demons—who are really rebellious angels—got their start (Isaiah 14:12-15). That's how evil came into human existence, too, as Adam and Eve chose to cross over into a forbidden realm . . . and they soon found out to their sorrow that God wasn't kidding about what would happen if they did.

**Are there demons in the world today?** Yes, there are. **Are they dangerous?** Yes, they are. **Is there any protection from them?** Yes, there is. And this protection is found in Jesus alone, at whose name "*every knee will bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father*" (Philippians 2:10-11). Let us give Him praise!