

“The Spiritual Practice of Exorcising our Demons”

Mark 1:21-34

July 19, 2020

We all have voices in our heads that support us, cheer us on, soothe us and connect us with the world. We also have voices in our heads that judge us, deride our appearance and intelligence, and rob us of our confidence with the world. Some might say these voices--good and evil--possess us. Sometimes the evil voices win out over the good voices, thrusting us headlong into depression, isolation and acting out. But that we could call on Jesus to exorcise the demons in our head. Listen to this story from Mark 1, verses 21 - 34, and hear what the Spirit is saying to us today:

Then they entered Capernaum. When the Sabbath arrived, Jesus lost no time in getting to the meeting place. He spent the day there teaching. They were surprised at his teaching—so forthright, so confident—not quibbling and quoting like the religion scholars.

Suddenly, while still in the meeting place, he was interrupted by a man who was deeply disturbed and yelling out, “What business do you have here with us, Jesus? Nazarene! I know what you’re up to! You’re the Holy One of God, and you’ve come to destroy us!”

Jesus shut him up: “Quiet! Get out of him!” The afflicting spirit threw the man into spasms, protesting loudly—and got out.

Everyone there was incredulous, buzzing with curiosity. “What’s going on here? A new teaching that does what it says? He shuts up defiling, demonic spirits and sends them packing!” News of this traveled fast and was soon all over Galilee.

Directly on leaving the meeting place, they came to Simon and Andrew’s house, accompanied by James and John. Simon’s mother-in-law was sick in bed, burning up with fever. They told Jesus. He went to her, took her hand, and raised her up. No sooner had the fever left than she was up fixing dinner for them.

That evening, after the sun was down, they brought sick and evil-afflicted people to him, the whole city lined up at his door! He cured their sick bodies and tormented spirits. Because the demons knew his true identity, he didn’t let them say a word.

Here ends the lesson. May God bless these words as we seek to apply them to our lives.

How interesting that it is the demons who know the true nature of Jesus, and *not* the good and righteous people following Jesus around. Neither those who venerated him, nor those who condemned him see Jesus for the revolutionary thinker and leader that he is, the Messiah.

Knowing him to be of quiet and inherent power, the powers that occupy the deranged man's mind and the feeble woman's body hold back from direct confrontation, waiting for another day to openly face off against the Messiah. "What business do you have here with us?" they demand to know. Jesus also bides his time, not directly engaging the tormented spirits on this day, but nevertheless invoking the superior power of God to make them flee their unwilling hosts. It is in what Jesus does *not* say to the demons that shows his true strength against them.

He has learned in the wilderness not to directly confront evil, for it is a fact of life and it will be present wherever love and compassion are also present. Jesus learns that he does not live by bread alone or through riches and earthly power or in the basking glow of his friends' veneration.

Instead of either men or women, wild beasts would be his companions. He learns that he has nothing to fear from the voices in his head, for the angels will take care of him. He learns not to offer the devil a lift on his back, because as Anne Lamott puts it, "if evil likes the ride, pretty soon it will want to drive." Jesus in the wilderness makes a choice to live only for the love of God and that is what gives him his inner strength, his power to chase evil away from the afflicted.

Walter Wink, a 20th century theologian who wrote extensively about the struggles of good and evil, says this about our need to choose our lives for God:

When we fail to make conscious, committed choices for God, we default...and Satan becomes like a holding company that has taken over billions of mortgages in arrears through foreclosure. The satanic is actualized as evil precisely by our failure to choose and has no more power that we continue to give it. Hence, it would be truer to say, “we made the devil do it.”

(Wink, *Unmasking the Powers*, 1986)

This is precisely the situation 10-year-old Jojo Betzler finds himself in during the final year of WWII. A boy raised in Germany, Jojo is required to join the Hitler Youth Nazi training organization. By 1940, ninety percent of German non-Jewish boys and girls are indoctrinated in this manner.

Erin Blakemore, in her article, “How the Hitler Youth Turned a Generation of Kids into Nazis,” writes of the process and damage done to the social fabric of Germany by the Hitler Youth program.

For the Nazis, the [Hitler Youth] group had other benefits. Not only did it allow the Third Reich to indoctrinate children at their most impressionable, but it let the Nazis remove them from the influence of their parents, some of whom opposed the regime. The Nazi Party knew that families—private, cohesive groups not usually under political sway—were an obstacle to their goals. The Hitler Youth was a way to get Hitler’s ideology into the family unit, and some members of the Hitler Youth even denounced their parents when they behaved in ways not approved of by the Reich.

Jojo tries hard to be what the Reich wants him to be – a stone cold killer for Hitler. But he can’t quite get there. When the older boys order him to kill a bunny with his bare hands and he balks, they jeer and deride him, calling him “JoJo Rabbit.” He is shamed and runs away. Due to a serious and debilitating injury he sustains that day, he can’t fight in the war, further isolating him from his peers.

But he is not alone. His mother, an operative in the local German Resistance, loves him and encourages him to regain his loving heart. As he dutifully dresses each day in his Hitler Youth uniform, his mother watches carefully over him, wistfully wishing him to return to the innocent little boy he once was. Unbeknownst to Jojo, she is secreting in the attic of their home a 16-year-old Jewish girl, her dead daughter's childhood friend. Jojo soon discovers the stowaway and in their verbal exchanges that follow over a number of weeks, we are brought to understand the full extent of the indoctrination he has experienced.

When the girl Elsa asks Rosie about her son's prejudice and blind allegiance to the Reich, Rosie his mother assures her of Jojo's innate goodness and virtue: "I know there's a little boy in there somewhere," she tells the frightened girl. "The boy who loves to play and runs to you in the thunder & thinks you invented chocolate cake." Little does Rosie know her own fate, though she knows the risks she is taking in fighting underground against the Nazis. And little does she know how her sweet boy will redeem himself at the critical juncture in his own life when he has to choose between Hitler's Final Solution and Elsa's life.

Jojo also has a best friend, Yorkki, a delightfully naïve boy who sees the good in everything. The Nazis are not successful in converting him either to their agenda. Yorkki shows Jojo unconditional love during a time when love is negative currency for the Reich. Always greeting Jojo with an enthusiastic hug, we ourselves in these pandemic days are reminded how much we miss the intimacy and human connection of hugging and being hugged.

Here's where the story intersects with the scripture story Shirley just read to you: as are the man whose demon confronts Jesus and Simon's mother-in-law

who is healed by Jesus in her home, Jojo is also haunted by the personification of evil, for him an alter ego in the form of the Fuehrer himself, Adolf Hitler.

An alter ego is a person's "secondary or alternative personality," but it can also be a "trusted and intimate friend." At first, Jojo's imaginary friend is both trusted by him and supportive of him, spurring him on with fun war games and his own clever form of indoctrination. Hitler's influence on Jojo is evident when the boy tells Elsa, his mother's hidden guest, "You are not a proper person." He then proceeds to list off the filthy myths about Jewish people that he has heard and blindly accepted:

"Jews are demons who love money."

"The Queen Jew lays eggs."

"Jews are born with animal bodies and they live in caves."

"Jews have horns covered up by their hair."

"Jews hang from the ceiling when asleep, as do bats."

Serendipitously, it is in his writing down these untruths about Jews and illustrating them in a scrapbook that saves his and Elsa's lives when the Gestapo comes to roust their home, looking for evidence that will incriminate Jojo and his mother as part of the anti-Nazi Resistance.

Jojo's sense of self is tested a short time later when tragedy breaks his heart. "Although we speak of death as the great enemy," writes Rev. Robin Meyers in his book, *Saving Jesus from the Church*, "it may be despair that haunts us even more—the idea that life itself means nothing." Jojo struggles to go on living, feeling hopeless and orphaned.

When we see the worst it has to offer, this world can shred our hopefulness to ribbons and can shatter our humanity and goodness into tiny pieces. That's what evil wants; that is, the opportunity it has to indwell us and

make us hardened-heart people of greed and hatred and prejudice-- soul-killers who will strip away the optimism of the world.

Fate hands Jojo reasons to turn away from love toward the dark side of Nazi extremism. He would be *celebrated* by the Reich for turning Elsa over to them. He would earn a medal from the Fuehrer for turning in his own mother as an enemy of the State. He would be rewarded for fighting in Hitler's evil, insane war and social campaign to eliminate the world of the Jewish people.

But love wins the day for Jojo, just as it does for the man possessed by the Demon-Who-Knows-Jesus and the woman who is afflicted and bedridden. Jesus could have walked on by, not bothering to stop and confront the evil that was bent on destroying these two lives. But he does stop. And he does minister to them, leading with the value of love. It is love that saves them and loves that saves young Jojo as well. As Elsa reminds him, "We have to dance to show God we are grateful to be alive."

We simply must call on the power of God's love against the demons we confront today, those who occupy our minds and spirits—and those who occupy the body and soul of other sufferers, demons that do not want us to live good stories. "Evil takes root by a series of small decisions," warned the cleric and anti-apartheid activist, The Most Reverend Desmond Tutu. He talked about the human form being made for goodness, not for its opposite, evil. He said, " Evil does not sweep in like a tsunami; it bleeds into the fabric of life, washing out the joy and staining the beauty."

Evil takes root by a series of small decisions. This is so true. That is how apartheid started in South Africa, a system of institutional racism that was born out of propaganda and myth-telling about the superiority of the occupying white race in relation to the indigenous black people of that country.

There was a time when no one thought apartheid would ever be upended, much less that a black prisoner of the State, Nelson Mandela would not only be freed from captivity, but would go on to be President of the nation and a world ambassador and spokesperson for peace.

There was a time also when the world's people thought the Axis Powers would win WWII and divide up the world as their shared possession. Whoever would have guessed that Japan and Italy would become docile and Germany just a few years after the war would become a democracy and would usher in the 21st century led by a female Chancellor, Angela Merkel?

Today in our society, we are struggling with our own demons and myths, as we face civil unrest and coronavirus data that confirms the highest prevalence of the virus in the groups of people least able to fight it off—people of color, the elderly voiceless persons of our country, and people without resources for medical insurance or unemployment benefits.

We are told myths that are inspired by evil, by that force that does not wish us to live good lives together, myths such as:

“The police are all violent persons wanting to kill people.”

“Covid-19 only hits those who live in other places.”

“The protesters are criminals who are only interested in looting, setting cars on fire and vandalizing buildings.”

“Black Lives Matter diminishes the lives of other people who aren't black.”

“The pandemic is China's fault and we should discriminate against the Asian peoples of this country in retaliation.”

Today is the day we must choose good hearts over evil intentions. Today is the day we must recapture the children within us—their innocent, trusting nature, their belief that thunder will hurt them and that their mothers invented chocolate cake, invented it *just for them*.

Our country and our God need us to act in love, to put love's interests above all others we care so deeply about—above financial and national security, the need to blame our neighbor and the intoxication of winning, winning at all cost to human and natural life. Health care must be a right for all people, not a privilege for those lucky enough to be on Medicare or covered under an employer's policy or able to afford premiums upwards of \$1000 per month. I don't see this as a Democratic issue or a Republican issue; I see this as a human rights necessity that we *can* afford as a country and that we cannot afford to ignore any longer.

Our country needs to care for our elderly persons—our *family members* who lack voice and self-determination. We have to find a way to keep them safe during COVID-19, but not to keep them walled off from their loved ones.

Our country needs to find a way forward out of racism; we need to dismantle the systems in our country that have subtly-- and not so subtly-- favored the interests of white people over other people not fortunate enough to be born into the ruling class and race.

Our churches, synagogues, mosques and other institutions and practices of faith need to take the lead in this work, just as Jesus took the lead in the first century, as Moses did in the ancient tradition of the Hebrew-Jewish faith, as Gautama Buddha did in the 5th century BCE and Mohammed did in the 6th century. These were all persons of peace who led from the overarching value of love.

The song I chose today for our post-sermon Reflection is titled, "Worn." It was written years ago but has current meaning for us. I can picture Jojo and other victims of war feeling completely worn out—worn out from violence, worn out from loss, worn out by propaganda, worn out by the cost of survival in

wartime conditions and worn out by constant caring. This is called “compassion fatigue” and it is something we are experiencing right now.

The song sings our national weariness:

“I’m tired, I’m worn.
My heart is heavy
from the work it takes
to keep on breathing.
I’ve made mistakes;
I’ve let my hope fail.
My soul feels crushed
by the weight of this world.”

The songwriter also cries out for God’s support, for an exorcising of the demons of hopelessness and cynicism that many now face every day. Continuing, he sings:

“I know that You can give me rest,
so, I cry out with all I have left,
‘Let me see redemption win;
let me know the struggle ends,
that you can mend a heart
that’s frail and torn.
I want to know a song can rise
from the ashes of a broken life,
and all that’s dead inside can be reborn,
because I’m worn.’”

How do we engage the Spiritual Practice of Exorcism? First, we identify those voices within us that do not want us to live a good story, and we push them away from our heart and head. And then we find a purpose for our life, something that speaks to us in the language of love of self and others. Finally, we become myth busters in the areas in which we hold sway—in our families, our schools and other workplaces, on social media, and in the ways we conduct our relationships both intimate and casual. We must be the change we want to see.

In past weeks, we learned that through Spiritual Practice we can reclaim our capacity for Public Witness, Forgiveness, Acceptance, Ableness, Patriotism, and now, for Exorcizing the Demons that hold us down and make us feel worn out. By seeking a “solidarity of grace,” as G.B. Caird wrote back in 1956, we can embrace the group courage that is our church community and welcome in for all people the positive message of God’s enduring and unconditional love even as we usher out the negative voices that greedily predict our failure.

We must prevail; we must not fail.

May It Be So.

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