

## “The Possession of Fear”

Deuteronomy 18:15-20  
Mark 1:21-28

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(Sneeze!!) Thank you for that blessing! Have you ever wondered about the origins of the tradition of blessing people when they sneeze? Well, I am always curious about these kinds of things. The earliest writing about this happening goes back to the 1st century. Chances are that the tradition goes back even further. A number of explanations have been floating around. The one I like the best (for its absurdity) is that it was once thought that when a person sneezes his soul comes out temporarily until it makes its way back into the body. And since it was common knowledge that evil spirits lurked in every corner, one or more could take advantage of the suddenly soulless victim and takeover the recently unoccupied space. And so the calling upon God for blessing was to safeguard the person from such a tragedy.

Certainly today we say bless you for much different reasons, some superstitious some not. But perhaps this gives us an idea of what the world was like in the first century when Jesus walked the earth.

The idea of evil spirits was certainly the common understanding of cultures all over the world. The New Testament is filled with examples of Jesus exorcising evil spirits. If they are not real, then why doesn't Jesus just say so?

Theologian Karl Barth spoke of evil as a delusion, a powerful one, but all the same at its heart a deception. Its only power is in its ability to control people by deception. In John 8, Jesus refers to the devil, as the father of lies, there is no truth in him. The word devil literally means deceiving one. So if the devil commands the evil spirits, then they are agents of deception.

Perhaps Jesus knew that the best way to deal with deception is to call it out. In our passage in Mark 1, Jesus doesn't tell the possessed man that there is not such thing as an evil spirit, he simply tells the spirit to be silent and come out. Whether or not the spirit was real or not was not as important as whether or not this man believed it was real. There is nothing to fear but fear itself. It held power over him. He had no free will. Jesus restored his free will. He was imprisoned by evil, and that prison is one of fear, and fear is only well founded if one believes that there is not a greater power than that which is feared.

In the TV show Heroes, people all over the world are developing special powers. One of the “bad” guys has a power that is based on fear. He only has power when others fear him. The power is very real, but it requires fear to manifest. There is one character whose power is that she cannot be permanently harmed or killed. Her body restores itself. When confronted by the bad guy, she has no fear and therefore he has no power over her.

The reason why people were so astounded with Jesus' ability to cast out evil spirits, is that they did not believe that there was a power on earth greater than evil. They felt vulnerable to evil, fearful. And that's why superstitions like saying bless you existed. It was a way for them to convince themselves that they could be safe from an evil world. Jesus displayed a power that makes the power of evil inconsequential where it is believed.

It is interesting that perhaps the first true recognition of Jesus' true identity was by an evil spirit. The spirit not only knew that Jesus was of God, but that he could not even challenge his power at all. The spirit left the man at a word from Jesus. No fight at all. It's like when a person who has been deceiving others is confronted before others with indisputable evidence of his lie, all his power goes away and he goes too.

Even though, much of this country seems to profess faith in Christ, we seem to me to be a very fearful society. 9/11 certainly heightened our fearfulness. It has made us fearful in general of foreigners. You can't go to an airport without being reminded by yellow levels and orange levels that we should have a heightened awareness of the potential for evil that lurks in every corner.

The state of our economy has made us fearful. What if we have another depression? What if we lose our job? Our house? Our lifestyles? More jobless people, leads to more crime. Let's increase our level of security at home and work. Let's buy more guns. We say we believe in Christ, but do we believe in his power for our lives? Or does the fear of evil possess us?

Some of you may remember a news story a couple of years ago where a gunman killed five Amish children and then killed himself. Pure evil. But it was the response from the Amish community that made headlines for weeks (a long time in today's news cycle). First, elders from the community visited the wife of the murderer to offer forgiveness. Then, the families of the slain girls invited the widow to their own children's funerals. Next, they requested that all relief money intended for the Amish families be shared with the widow and her children. And finally, in an astounding act of reconciliation, dozens of Amish families attended the funeral of the killer.

They didn't install security fences with armed guards. They didn't denounce the man and his family. They didn't seek revenge. They forgave and loved. They believed more in the power of Christ than the power of evil. Rather than buying into the fearful and violent ways of evil in an act of revenge, they overwhelmed it with the power of Christ. Rather than dedicating the life of their community in rooting out the evil of the world, they devoted their energy to the way of Christ.

What if as a country we would have responded like this to 9/11? What if we really believed in the power of Christ to cast out evil by forgiveness and love? Well, that would be just foolish, right? You may say, that may work in an ideal world, but not in the real world where evil must be dealt with on its own terms: violence and hate.

Paul wrote in his first letter to the Corinthians, “For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.” God chose such a foolish seeming way to confront evil in the world. He willingly, lovingly died at the hands of evil and forgave it as he died. Astounding.

We fear that evil will win if we forgive it, if we love it. We worry that we will only enable it. But in true reality, not by delusions of an evil world, the way of the cross defeats evil by love, not violence. By hope, not fear. By forgiveness, not revenge.

And just in case we think that Jesus is the only one who has a cross, he tells us with his own words, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.” And it doesn’t mean that we should silently suffer hardships, that we should let evil have it’s way. It means that we too must confront those possessed by the spirit of evil right in the face and say, “I forgive you for you know not what you do.” That is the way of the cross. That is the foolish way we are called to live. We are not to be possessed by fear. The power of God frees us to act as he himself acts: with love. In the face of love, evil is silent and will be cast out.

If the Spirit of Christ is in you, you have a power that is greater than evil...one that in the end cannot be defeated...one that restores us and regenerates us even when we are harmed or even killed! Let me end by reading the words of Martin Luther that we will soon sing:

And though this world, with devils filled, should threaten to undo us, we will not fear, for God hath willed His truth to triumph through us. The prince of darkness grim, we tremble not for him; His rage we can endure, for lo! His doom is sure; one little word shall fell him. That word above all earthly powers, no thanks to them, abideth; the Spirit and the gifts are ours through Him with us sideth; let goods and kindred go, this mortal life also; the body they may kill, God’s truth abideth still, His kingdom is forever. My friends, embrace the power of God in all it’s foolishness and no longer be possessed by the fearful ways of this world. Amen.