

Mark 1:21-28

LORD OF ALL

A question I was often asked by students during my years as a pastor in Lutheran schools was, ‘do you believe the devil is real?’ It’s an interesting question, because I tend to feel that people will accept the fact that you can believe in God but can still be sane, but if you say that you believe in Satan, or fallen angels or demons, you must be some kind of religious crackpot. To me that’s an interesting thing about our Western culture today; we can accept the light or bright side of many religious beliefs, but the darker side is weird and only thought and spoken about by those who are a bit extreme.

But in other cultures, that’s certainly not the case. Among what we might call more ‘spiritual cultures’, in places like Africa, parts of Asia and South America, New Guinea, stories of Satan and evil spirits outwardly working in people like in the Bible stories we have are common; I’ve spoken to a number of people who have seen this, and it’s accepted by people there like it was in Bible times as being real. Even here in Australia this is also the case among some indigenous cultures. When I spent six years as College Pastor at Yirara College in Alice Springs, a boarding school for indigenous students from all over the Northern Territory, and into WA, SA, and Queensland, working with students of whom many came from traditional backgrounds, including their connection with the spiritual side of the world and life, I saw and was involved in things I never thought I would be, especially in Australia. For example, just before our confirmation service each year one of the forty or so confirmees or someone close to them or in their dormitory would see or experience something which couldn’t be explained away and would absolutely scare them all. Even in our Western culture, not that long ago, when someone was ill a priest might often be brought in to perform an exorcism. Martin Luther in the Small Catechism refers to the devil several times, and he is said to have once, in the midst of trial and suffering turmoil which we would nowadays call depression, to have thrown an inkpot at an apparition of the devil who he believed was standing in the corner watching him. And yet for us, today, that darker side of the spiritual world is often in the ‘don’t go there’ category.

In the Bible the devil is a very real and active character, from the Fall of Adam and Eve right through to Revelation. In the Gospels Jesus often clashes outwardly with evil demons; today's Gospel is the first of four times in Mark alone that Jesus casts out demons, and it's interesting that Mark records this as the first miracle in Jesus' ministry, to truly show He is Lord of all. In many of the Gospel accounts the demons seek out Jesus and name Him, when the people who are there, including the religious know-it-alls, don't know who He is! In our reading here the spirit in the man who came into the synagogue calls out, "Jesus from Nazareth, what do you want with us? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are! You are God's Holy One." (v. 23) There's the great contest between God and Satan in the book of Job. And we acknowledge this ongoing battle between God and the devil in places like our baptism service, where the question is asked, 'do you reject the devil and all his ways so you will no longer be led by him?'

Not just back in Bible times, or a few centuries ago, or in foreign countries, or within other cultures in our land, the devil is alive and well, and at work, among us today. But in Jesus, beginning with accounts like this one, and finishing with Jesus' dying and rising again, the devil lost the final war. In the 2004 movie *The Passion* there is a powerful scene of when Jesus was dying on the cross the devil was screaming in agony, because he knew he had been defeated. But while the war is lost, the battles are still going on, right up to the end, and the devil is trying to take as many people away from God, from trusting God, from wanting to be with God, as He can. That's his work.

The devil is real, the devil is at work today. And the devil is most effective when we either deny or ignore his existence, because we aren't watching out for the ways he works. We need to take up that slogan our government gave us regarding terrorist attacks a few years ago: Be Alert, Not Alarmed. Knowing God as Lord of all, light and dark, and knowing Jesus as our Saviour, that's how we can now face the devil and his work; be alert, not alarmed.

One way the devil works is by convincing us that things which are his work, are actually harmless, even fun. Things like Ouija boards and horoscopes. I have ministered with people who have been messed up by these things which our society today tells us are harmless. In one particular case the lady was hospitalised with a mental illness, which I have no doubt was the right diagnosis, but I also believe that it was brought on at least in part by her and her daughters 'playing' with a Ouija board; that's one way the kind

of possession we read about in Mark's account here comes out today. We don't need to be afraid of the devil, but nor do we want to give him a foot in the door to our lives.

Back in my Alice Springs days when I was first confronted with these dark spiritual happenings of some people, I had no idea what to do. My principal, a pastor who had worked with traditional indigenous people for some time, suggested I talk to one of our seminary lecturers who we both knew was very much into the spiritual side of the world, and from whom in my student days I had heard some of those accounts of what he had witnessed overseas. While I'm not a fan of horror movies, I was worried that in response to what our students were experiencing I would have to do some kind of exorcism like in the movies; spirits flying around the room and the person lying on the bed shaking. Thankfully it was nothing like that. His advice was simple, and effective, and based on the many accounts we have of Jesus dealing with Satan in the Gospels. Don't go looking for or seeking out these encounters, they will find you. Begin by going into the room involved and saying the name of the Triune God; name this as God's place. Read aloud one of the Bible accounts of Jesus casting out demons as a reminder that Jesus has power and authority over the dark world. Pray for peace for all those troubled by what has happened. And leave in that place a cross and maybe a poster with the Lord's Prayer and the Creed on it to remind everyone that God is Lord of all. Simple, and effective. And for those involved it always brought them peace and assurance of God's love and power in caring for them. For me, although I was still nervous, I knew it was ok because I wasn't taking on the devil, but it was name and words of Jesus who had the power to drive away the darkness and bring the light.

The devil is real, the devil is at work. But through God's name, God's word, and prayer, we can be strong and confident. We can also be aware of two ways the devil does try to get to us. The first is by temptation, which is anything which tries to lure us away from God and God's way for us. He's been doing that since way back with Adam and Eve, telling them that the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge was ok to eat, no matter what God had said. Facing temptation makes us feel like Paul writes in Romans 7, 'the good that I want to do isn't what I do but the bad I don't want to do is what I end up doing'. Be aware of what tempts you, and ask God to help you with it. In our second reading today, Paul writes about how we are all tempted by different things; what might lead one person away from God doesn't necessarily tempt someone else. Be aware of how what you do or say, even it's ok for you, might be the devil working in you to tempt someone

else. And when the devil is working on you through temptation, take that to God in prayer, go to the Bible to read again about God's love for you. If the temptation to go away from God is too hard to face alone, don't face it alone, use the power and the strength, and the love, of the One who is Lord of all.

And the devil loves to work on us through our guilt. Telling us we are not good enough. That we have sinned too much for God to forgive us. Or making us believe that we have to do something or live a worthy life in order for God to forgive us. And the devil can use people, including Christians, in bringing that message of having to be 'good enough' so that God can love us. As we see in Jesus' encounter with an evil spirit in our reading today, the Word of Jesus has power over the devil, driving Him away. And the Word we hear speaking into our guilt is, 'I forgive you.' 'You are worthy of God's love because I have made you worthy'. 'I died so you can be forgiven'. 'I rose so you can have new life'. 'You are mine'. When the devil attacks you by causing you to question your relationship with God, go to God; hear, and see, His Word of love for you in Jesus. Know that there is nothing which can cause Him to change His love for you.

With what we have looked at so far in Mark's Gospel about Jesus, with His Baptism, overcoming temptation from Satan in the desert, and now casting out an evil spirit, as well as what is to come, we know that He is Lord of all. The devil is real, and active, and working to take us away from God. But just as real, and active, and even more powerful, is God's love for us and His victory over the devil in Jesus. In Jesus God shows that He is Lord of all, and however the devil works in and around us today, Jesus' Word still has authority over him. Stay with the One who not only loves us, but who is also the Lord of all. Amen.

FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION/REFLECTION

- What are some ways you believe the devil and evil spirits sometimes work in and around us today? Have you ever experienced any of these yourself, or known others who have?
- Are there any temptations you particularly face in your life? How do you face them? Do you often struggle with them? Bring to God any temptations you are struggling with right now.
- Does guilt over things you have said or done ever get you down, and make it difficult for you to accept and rely on God's love for you? If so, bring any guilt you have to God and ask for His forgiveness.

Pray: thank God that in Jesus He has shown His power and authority over Satan, and that He won the victory to be Lord of all. Ask God to help to you stay strong and close to Him so we can also overcome the temptations Satan places before us.

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