

Demons

As we wade into the Gospel of Mark this year, one thing you're not going to be able to avoid is an awful lot of talk about demons.

In fact, in only 16 chapters of this, the shortest gospel, Mark's talking about demons over 21 times!

So if we want to get inside some of the mysteries that Mark presents to us through his take on the story of Jesus, we've gotta deal with demons.

Jesus faces his demons in the desert, then he throws them out of a man in the synagogue today, and soon we shall see him doing exactly that any number of times, in any number of places, freeing any number of people from their demons.

Now I know, we live in the 21st century.

Any talk about demons is usually limited to the newest Hollywood horror flick — because everyone knows actual demons don't exist.

Except, of course, they do.

Maybe not as free floating spiritual beings, although that too is a matter for some debate, but they are here with each of us as remnants of past pains, past hurts, troubles and griefs.

I knew a woman who was sexually abused by her step-father for years.

She eventually found alcohol and then stronger drugs, drugs like cocaine and heroin, that, for awhile, covered over the pain that such a brutal betrayal caused.

Only after reaching her own bottom did she get the help she needed, part of which involved going back, now as an adult, to those brutal childhood days, to face what had happened to her.

And what she discovered on that journey back into the horror was her own demon.

She told me it looked like the Wookiee from Star Wars — you remember, the big tall hairy pal of Harrison Ford; but it was not nice and friendly, it was vicious and frightening.

At first, she could only run from it, trembling and afraid.

But as she continued her recovery, she kept going back to where that demon lived, not alone, but with a wise counselor, and as she kept going back, ever so slowly, the demon began to change – not in how it looked, but in how it behaved.

And slowly, that demon was transformed from something of unimaginable horror and fear into something she began to love; something she could even embrace, something that came to be her protector.

Facing our demons is an unavoidable circumstance if we want to develop spiritual maturity.

Maybe that's why Mark puts so many demon encounters in our way as we make our way through his gospel....to remind us that if Jesus, the pinnacle of what it is to be human, has demons to confront, well then, so do we.

And so even from the earliest days of the church, the fathers and mothers went into the desert, alone, to face themselves, to discover the nature of their own demons, and then, having faced them, to release them.

The sacrament of confession, also known as reconciliation, was always intended to be that same sort of invitation to all believers, a chance to examine ourselves deeply, not to be morbid about it, not to beat ourselves up, but to take on a rigorous self-assessment so that we might become free from the things that mess us up.

Just so, the famous 12 step programs have Steps 4, 5 and 6, which, in a nutshell, ask the person to write down on paper everything they ever did that hurt them or others, to then tell everything to a trusted person, and then, to let it all go.

Why go through such a difficult bout of self examination?

Because our demons, left to themselves, produce spirits that can and do mess with our lives, and the lives of those we are closest to.

Demons, left to their own devices, create spirits of jealousy or spirits of envy or spirits of greed, lust, anger and pride.

These spirits can and do invade our lives, often with a regularity that is painful to acknowledge.

They lead us into actions that are then deeply regretted, shamefully recalled, bitterly remembered.

And these are not the only spirits with which we must contend.

There are spirits that infest our institutions and our collective consciousness.

Spirits that demand an eye for an eye.

Spirits that justify the grotesque accumulation of wealth by a few when the vast majority of fellow human beings live in dire need, as the news reported just last week, the richest 1% own or control 50% of the world's wealth.

Spirits of demagoguery and fear, provoked to keep the few in positions of power.

These are the powers and principalities that St. Paul so often confronts; spirits that can blind all of us to the good life of compassion and sharing and being content with "enough," which is what God intends for us on this earth.

So in his very first chapter, Mark tells us that in Jesus, we have a redeemer who is stronger than any of those spirits, a friend who is always ready to free us from our demons.

"Christ comes and shatters the domineering designs that shackle people to lower standards of life than God intends.

Christ comes to free us from the demons of prejudice and pride, greed and guile.

Christ is among us, here in church, and there on the street corner, to demonstrate that saving power among us.

If we devote ourselves to anything less than this divinely directed destiny, we have missed the goal of faith." D. Lose. (paraphrased).

Coming face to face with our demons allows us to see that behind practically every angry word, every hopeless sense of insecurity, every fear and addiction is really a wound; and a wound, once tended to can be healed, and once healed, made well.

"What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth?" the demon asks in today's gospel lesson.

He is here to bind up our wounds, he is here to set us free.

+amen

