

Fifth Sunday After Pentecost—Year C
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St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee, WI
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We are a sophisticated people. We are a people with skills and degrees. We have book clubs and read the New York Times. We are a people who employ the scientific method to solve thorny problems in our world. We are a people who call a doctor when we are sick and not a magician.

Given our sophistication, perhaps it's strange that we are also a people who, from time to time, talk about demons. When we open our Prayer Books to follow along at a Baptism, the priest asks the candidate, or in the case of a baby, the parents, if they “renounce Satan and all the spiritual forces of wickedness that rebel against God?” And we ask those same parents if they will “renounce the evil powers of this world that corrupt and destroy the creatures of God?” We claim sophistication, but we talk about demons and evil spirits. Why, in the 21st century, would this institution we call the church, still tell us stories about demons and devils?

In this morning's Gospel, Jesus arrives at a town on the edge of the Lake of Gennesaret. In this town, a man has been plagued for years by demons. He is naked and filthy. The townspeople have chained him down for his own protection and the protection of others. But he escapes time and again, and when he does, he spends his time down in the graveyard. Jesus first asks the demon its name. And the demon answers, Legion. The demons possessing the man recognize that God is among them, and they are afraid. Then, Jesus casts the demons out, and the man is free. Free to sit at the feet of God again. Free to be clean and safe. Free to join the community again.

I've said many times, but I suppose it bears repeating: the things we know about the nature of God come directly from what we know about the person of Jesus. We know that our God is in the business of casting out demons because Jesus is in the business of casting out demons. Jesus did not strike the man dead; Jesus did not ignore the man; Jesus did not bargain with the demons inside of him. Jesus, full of the power of God and sure in his own authority, demanded the name of the demons and then cast them out so that the man could be free. Truly free.

Last Sunday night, after the massacre in Orlando had made the national news, several people from St. Mark's and a few from the wider community gathered here in the sanctuary to pray and to comfort one another. We lit candles, read scripture, and tied colored ribbons to the church bannisters for remembrance and solidarity. Later in the week, I wondered, why did I instinctively choose certain prayers and white candles? What is it about the aftermath of a tragedy that called us together remind ourselves of God's power and to add some light into the world? I think maybe we recognized that there were some nasty spirits in the air that needed to be named and exorcised.

I wonder if at some level we understand, even in this sophisticated world that we've made, that evil must be cast out. Demons must retreat from the light of our candles and the power of our prayers. And I wonder if, at some level, we understand that casting out evil is part of the business

that our God is in. I realize that prayers and candles seem useless in the midst of a stream of bullets, but that is the scandal of our belief. That we worship a God of peace who says that violence is not the end. That death is not the end. And that the demons that corrupt and destroy the children of God, ultimately, will lose their power when they are cast out.

And, by the way, I'm not trying to conflate one sick lunatic with an assault rifle to a horned demon or devil. The powers and principalities of this world are far more, well, sophisticated than that. We have to find out their names so that they can stop having power. The demon in Jesus' time took the name "Legion"—which is simply the name of the Roman armies who were occupying the land. Our contemporary demons have different names. The Legion of our time takes the form of ignorance, of apathy, of avarice, of over-stimulation, of gridlock. The demons that possess our society gave up their pitchforks long ago, and now they wield generational poverty, racism, distraction, narcissism and fatigue. These modern demons don't even have to work all that hard to rile up the citizenry and keep us bound and impotent, spinning around in our own uselessness, so that we don't take the time to pray. So that we don't take the time to light candles and center. So that we don't take the time to organize together for positive change in the world. So that we don't take the time to remember our Baptisms and the promises we made so long ago. These demons will delight as we wail and moan and wait for the next innocent to die. And really, there have been times this week, when I have wondered if they will win.

That kind of despair? I felt it; you may have felt it. I'm here to tell you, it's a lie. That's the demons talking. That is not the voice of the God whose name is hope. Whose name is peace. Whose name is justice.

And so our prayer this morning is for our shackles to be broken; our prayer this morning is for Jesus to help us name the demons and to cast them out.

Make no mistake; there are principalities and powers in this work that seek to kill and destroy the children of God. They prey on the vulnerable and then distract us from the hard work of bringing people back into right relationship with each other and with God.

We are a people who need to be possessed; not by the evil nonsense the assaults us day in and day out. But instead by the Holy Spirit of God; we need to be named and possessed by peace. Named and possessed by wisdom. Named and possessed by justice. Named and possessed by Jesus Christ, to whom we belong in the hope of the Resurrection. "As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus." Amen.