

Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany, Year B
The Rev Ian Burch
St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee, WI
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I think I ended up with a tie this year for my favorite Christmas present. I received a pair of red plaid pajamas, which I adore and have lived in for a month. And equally wonderful but perhaps a bit more surprising, I received a tiny stick of wood. It might not be at first glance obvious why a tiny stick made me so happy, but let me explain. A good friend sent me a tiny stick of wood from the palo santo tree that grows in the Yucatan peninsula and is understood to have properties related to healing and well being. People dating back to the height of the Incan empire have burned palo santo as a way to cleanse themselves from disease or from bad spirits.

Now, once this was all explained to me, I had to wonder what it is I was supposed to do with a magic stick that gets rid of bad vibes in your house or your body. See, I am a Christian person in 2021, and so I don't spend very much time trying to think of different ways that I could remove humors or ghosts from my house through magic. But, if I'm honest, this has been such a trying eleven months that I sort of thought, what the heck, it certainly couldn't hurt and maybe it would even help.

So, right after Christmas, when the house was quiet, I lit the end of my palo santo stick and let the smoke fill up my house. I thought about all the stress that the house has been carrying this last year. I thought about all the griefs from missed friends, family, and experiences. And I thought about what kind of future blessings I hoped to have in this home in the weeks and months to come. And as my house filled with the fragrant smoke of the palo santo, I generally felt like my prayers were lifted up to God on the smoke, or like the Psalmist says: Let my prayers rise up like incense before You.

So, why on earth did I invent a ritual with no background in the Bible and certainly none in the Book of Common Prayer? I am not quite sure. Maybe I was leaning on some kind of pre-Enlightenment instinct to use ritual as a form of primitive psychology. Maybe at some level, I think that you ought to just pray with what's available and that's the most authentic prayer. Maybe I was touched that a friend thought I might like this tiny present and it seemed odd not to use it. Regardless of the reason, I'm glad I burned the palo santo, and I think my house is better for it.

I'm not the first religious person to think that there might be something to the idea of evil spirits. Jesus, teaching today in the synagogue, is recognized by a spirit who fully intended to possess and harm the people studying in the synagogue. The spirit recognized the power of Jesus right before Jesus cast it out for good.

While I have no problem with anyone wanting to take this story literally, for my money, it speaks to the instinct in us that sometimes things are simply not right. If our entire parish community is suffering from months of isolation and loneliness, we might as well call that an evil spirit as anything else. Or, if an organization systematically discriminates on the basis of race or gender or ability, might that be a foul spirit as well? What about the when stress simply

gets the better of you and you yell at a spouse or a child or a friend? Surely, we can call that an unclean spirit that needs exorcism.

Regardless of whether you want to think about spirits are literal entities that float around and need banishing, or if you want to think of it as a colorful way to illustrate common human problems, the gospel story seems to say that Jesus is the Lord of all of it. And Jesus has power over all of it. There isn't one nasty part of the human condition that God doesn't know about and have power over. The spirits might lurk around but they'll never win.

Remember, the disciples are called and sent out to banish unclean spirits with the power of Jesus. I know this isn't language that we readily use in 2021. I can only tell you that my house felt better after I spent time burning the palo santo and talking to God. Maybe it was my way of remembering that God is the power that is close to me even in times of distress. Or maybe this new kind of global stress required a different kind of prayer from me. I don't really know. But I do know that God is right there in the very thick of it, even when the bad spirits are close by and seemingly powerful. Remember your Gospel stories. The spirits may be tough, but God is always the one standing at the end of the story.

Spirits can be strong, but God is stronger. There are many spirits in this world, but always remember, only one is Holy. Amen.