

A Sermon  
Preached at Trinity Episcopal Church  
Fort Worth, Texas  
Epiphany IV, 2012

How wonderful it is that we don't have any Big Mountains to climb this morning, now that the parish meeting is behind us. Today we can get down to what I've heard Fr McClain call "just plain, ordinary B-flat church."

We get this chance on the fourth Sunday of the Epiphany season during which, as you've been reminded plenty of times, the Prayer Book asks us to consider not parables or prophecies but rather the astonishing signs, the things Jesus did to back his claims—very often things which seemed to make no sense or to make sense for the first time ever but so right-up-under-your-nose they couldn't be denied. Today's moment in the synagogue at Capernaum is one of those. In the first lesson from Deuteronomy you heard Moses promising the Hebrews that, though he would not go with them into the Promised Land, God would not leave them comfortless, would send faithful prophets to lead them, prophets they could believe and trust. And that promise, of course, eventually grew into the messianic hope into which Jesus steps in today's Gospel. He goes into the synagogue and teaches, and when he's done people are impressed. "This guy teaches with *authority*. Not like the scribes." That should raise a question in your mind: how was it the scribes taught if not with authority? Well, to get a notion of that, go back and listen to Paul in today's lesson from Corinthians, another one of those cases where this may be so or that may be so or it may even be a sin—unless it happened on Wednesday or your grandmother was a Presbyterian or if you bought it at Wal-Mart. You know? Those tortuous adventures in casuistry a fascination with law creates. That's the way the scribes taught, and Jesus had likely treated the congregation to one of those You-have-heard-it-said-but-I-tell-you teachings. And they were impressed. "This guy gives you the word with the bark on it."

And that fits the pattern just right, doesn't it? Jesus can claim to be the prophet Moses promised. Neat as a pin. Hand in glove.

But when I was reading this and wondering what the Holy Spirit had to say to you today, I couldn't find much of a sermon. I mean, who here has an authority problem with

Jesus? We were all brought up believing that Jesus is Lord, and all of you here have believed that at least since your baptism. We don't have much trouble acknowledging Jesus as Messiah.

So where's the sermon? sez I to myself. I went back and re-read that lesson, and it came to me that the sermon here for us today is all about . . . demons. That's right, demons. I mean, no sooner than Jesus finishes, there's a stir. Evidently a man, part of the congregation, had an "unclean spirit" which elsewhere would be called a demon, and that spirit recognized Jesus right away. There was tumult in the man's soul, and the demon spoke. "What do you want with me, Jesus. I know who you are. Whatchoo gonna do to me?" Jesus wastes no words—"Come out of him"—and that demon is but *gone*. And what do the people standing around say? "This is a new teaching. Even the demons obey him."

Teaching? What teaching? Go back through that passage and show me any teaching. What I see is an act—which the crowd took as teaching in action, I suppose, but they were impressed sho nuff. Jesus' fame spread throughout the region.

Well. Well, well. Oh, dear. Demons. We hear that and get a little uneasy in our chair and mutter and demur. That's something from the past. We know better than that now. Oh, some people, the kind that handle snakes and holler wave their hands in the air and all that, they probably believe in demons, but . . . well. We're Episcopalians. We don't do demons.

Wanna bet?

Back when I was in seminary and knew a whole more than I know now, I couldn't help noticing that the Bible is full of demons, front to back, so though I knew we don't do demons, knew *I* sure didn't do demons, I figured I needed to come to terms with the whole idea somehow. I was looking for a definition. I got one from somebody, maybe Dr. Moreau, who knew all about Greek theology, and the definition was, more or less, that a demon—the Greek *daimon*—is *any part of a being that takes control of the whole* and deforms and derails and pollutes it, misshapes it, drives it nuts. That's what demons do. They usurp the driver's seat, and once their grip closes nobody knows where they'll steer the careening vehicle. *A part* takes over the *whole*.

You know that, you can see that. Demons come in all sizes. Our nation has one—well, it has a good many—but at least one immediately recognizable today is the demon of anger that plagues our political discourse during these campaigns. “The voters are angry. So and so has identified with that anger, tapped into that anger, is making hay out of that anger. The president needs to show some passion, get angry.” Yeah, that. That’s a demon. We should know better, but we ain’t drivin’ Betsey. The demon is. Anger is a part of human nature. Officially, it’s a sin, although I’m not sure anger is the sin so much as what we do with anger. But today anger has got our political body by the tail with a downhill pull. Much good may it do us.

Churches can get demons. Parishes sure get them. Years ago I was rector of a parish where they’d done pretty well from the 1870s right on up into the 1940s. But when that war was over, all kinds of . . . well . . . *new* people, not exactly *like* us, started to move into town, and some of them, gulp, wanted to join that parish. In 1948, the vestry—I am not making this up—the vestry voted to close membership. The demon of pride, better-than-you-are, snobbery, had that parish in its grip. Bishop Mason didn’t put up with it, cast that demon right out.

And they come in all sizes to you and me personally, from within and without, day and night, whispering and yelling, coaxing and coercing. You know what yours are; I know what mine are; we’ve all got demons. And now that you think about them this way, you’ll likely admit it: we’re all demon possessed to a greater or lesser degree. A lot of the time we’re so used to them we just call them bad habits; but if you’ve ever tried to kick one of those, you know they don’t go without a fight. You can’t just say “Get thee hence” and expect cooperation. You have to go up into the attic and rassel ‘em down two flights of stairs and out the back door and off the porch. And before you can wipe your sweaty brow, the suckers will run right around the house and come in the front door while you’re getting your breath. You know. If you’re anything like me, and I think you are, you *know*. Demons are real.

Another thing about demons: they lie. They’re part of the devilish urge to disbelieve what God has been telling us from the first, namely that He loves us. But from the Garden of Eden up to now, the Father of Lies whispers, “Oh, he doesn’t really mean it.” Demons make us believe our bond with God is broken. I learned that when I was a

seminarian and working right across town at All Saints Hospital as a “chaplain intern.” Fr. Blackwell gave us about two weeks’ prep and then turned us loose on the helpless patients. One of the first rooms I walked into held a feller who took one look at me, saw that chaplain badge, and figured I was God’s boy come to see that he was getting his punishment. “I don’t know what it is I done to make God put thissun on me, but I musta done sump’n.” How many people have you heard say things like that? If something bad happens, and lots does, it must be God sending a demon to punish us. The people Jesus taught sure thought so: disease means punishment by divine agency. Lots of people, some of them maybe in this room today, find it very hard to believe that God loves them when Bad Stuff happens. We might even just say that demons are the Bad Stuff That Happens. Merciful Heavens, how do you fight that?

I hope this doesn’t sound too simple minded, but the answer is: we ask God to exorcise them, to cast them out, to free us. Now, when I say exorcism I don’t mean to strap some adolescent girl to a bed and watch her turn six different colors and growl and float up in the air and barf on the priest. That’s rude. You all remember that sensational movie and all the knock-offs that appear now and then. Not that—although this church does practice ritual exorcism. Some years back, St. Timothy’s across town was desecrated, and Bishop Barnds, once rector of this parish, exorcised the whole place.

I’m not talking about that. I’m talking about how you and I, how *we*, get rid of the demons that plague us, personally, right at home, very real and very ugly, dangerous often. We can do a lot worse than pray that believer’s prayer from the old children’s hymn—*Come into my heart, Lord Jesus*—because that’s what it takes.

Let me see if I can help you get a notion of what I’m talking about. Jesus, the Bible tells and we believe, is The One sent from God, firstborn among the new creation, our teacher and Lord. And what does Jesus say? He reminds us, in the first place, that no matter what we’ve been led to believe, God is not angry with us. He reminds us that God’s message is love. “God your father loves you so much that he’s sent me to tell you you’re not condemned. The way God sees you, you’re wonderful, splendid, perfect, destined for glory.” And Jesus reminds us that we don’t need lots of rules but rather only two: we must learn to love God the way God loves us—heart, soul, and mind—and to love each other that way, no exceptions. He summed all that up for us in last week’s

gospel: repent and believe the gospel. Get your eyes off your demons; turn them to God in Christ Jesus; stop believing the lies you've heard and hear everywhere and start living in the conviction that you are God's beloved child in whom He is pleased beyond description. Do that, and you'll love everybody else that way. Get you some Kingdom Eyes and behold the world in a new and eternal light. That's the way God sees the world and you and me, and when we all *get* that and *act* on it, well, the Kingdom of Heaven is revealed in its splendor all about us.

Well, to that you wouldn't be remiss to respond like Jake Barnes at the end of *The Sun Also Rises*: wouldn't it be nice if it were so? Because you know and I know and only a fool doesn't know that life ain't like that. I mean, that's what the first two chapters of Genesis are about. If God is good and loves us and we're good and created to love, then why do we treat each other like Hell? We have to live in what we call history, time and tide and circumstance. And that's the truth. For reasons of His own, maybe because the school of hard knocks is the only way we can learn to love, I don't know, we first find God in history. It's all part of the mystery of God, but just remember that God Himself came and lived in it, and Jesus had to put up with a whole lot more than any of us. Never. The. Less . . .

Let me tell you a story. Down in Monterrey at Sagrada Familia parish, a woman named Mary González was the apple of everybody's eye. She was a simple in her fifties, not very well off, but she was happy just about all the time. Then one day she went to the doctor. And she got some bad news. And she got some bad doctoring. Pretty soon she was losing control of her fine motor skills, then the big ones; next she couldn't walk, had to sit, lie, be pushed; finally she lost control of her innards and spent her life being cleaned up by a daughter who found it all very hard to justify. But through it all to the bitter end, Mary was healed. Happy, chirpy, worrying about others, full of prayers. She never once listened to the demon that had crawled in bed with her. It had the best of her in one way, to be sure, no doubt about that. But she died in such a state of . . . well . . . joy is all I can call it . . . that we all felt her love with us with no doubt. Still do.

Now, it's not easy to do that. Your life is going great, things are generally good, and one day *you* go to the doctor's office. Or someone learns something about a spouse that's pretty awful. Or a child. Or a friend. And remember, sometimes we let the

demons in. We let that drink or that drug or that pride or that greed—their name is Legion—right in the front door and nurse it to our breast like Cleopatra and her asp. Am I asking you just to ignore what can't be denied? Not at all. I'm asking you to admit it and turn it over to Jesus, because as another hymn says, "there's no other way."

Even the demons obey Jesus. That's the new teaching. And you come to believe it by letting it happen. Don't ask me to explain *how* it happens; but just like the demon in today's gospel, our demons know what they're up to, and if you, if I, in desperation turn in prayer to God and say, "Lord, help me believe in your love. Help me remember that the horrors that sometimes come after me are not your doing. Help me remember that, whether it's my own fault or whether I was just in the wrong place at the wrong time, nothing, nothing whatsoever can separate me from your love." Then do your best to act that out. It is not easy, and we don't always meet the test. I'll tell you, though, I don't know how Jesus does it, but somehow He knows. And He comes. He holds your hand, and He loves you from start to finish. I know other therapies are there, and thank God for them. But down at the bottom of my soul, where I am umbilicated to God for time and eternity, I know it works. Even the demons obey Jesus. It's not therapy. It's the mystery of God's love. And somehow, it works.

I know because I speak from experience.

Amen.