

THE DEMON WHO HITCHED A RIDE TO CHURCH

Once upon a time a man went to church. And he took someone with him. Now, as you know, members of churches are often encouraged to invite a family member or friend to come to worship with them on Sunday morning. Churches love to have guests! The more the merrier! But in the case of the man I'm talking about in this sermon, the guest he took to church wasn't exactly welcome. The visitor he brought with him was a demon.

Now, whether or not the man knew that a demon was hitching a ride with him, we don't know. It could well be that the little devil was living so quietly and inconspicuously in the man's heart that the man wasn't actually aware of the dark power that was influencing his life. That's often how demons work their woe: in clever, subtle ways while hidden in the shadows of people's lives.

Of course, no matter how concealed and secretly a demon tries to do its dirty work, the people to whom a demon hitches itself can't help but feel that something isn't quite right with their life. They can sense that some mysterious, dismal, bleak invisible force or power is exerting its influence over them; weighing down on them; robbing the joy from them; and gradually nudging them further and further away from God and God's ways.

That's how this man felt. He sensed that his life was somehow off track and every day God's light seemed to be getting dimmer and dimmer. But he couldn't quite put his finger on exactly what was causing him to feel distanced from the Lord. Even so, the man attended church regularly, hoping to get a spiritual "booster shot." And his demon would hitch a ride with him.

Maybe you're thinking, "A demon in church? That can't be."

Oh yes, it can be. It's a little known fact that demons don't mind going to church at all. Of course, you can't actually see them because they remain discreetly hidden in the hearts of worshippers, subtly working their dark influence on them. And just like we enjoy greeting one another when we gather to worship on Sunday mornings, demons like to see their colleagues in church every week, too. And when they run into each other they wave hello, wink slyly and urge each other on to bigger and better torments as their human hosts pass one another and go to their usual pews.

But I digress. Now, back to my story.

This particular demon I'm talking about settled in for the usual worship stuff: singing, prayers, a sermon message. It could be a bit boring, to be sure, but the demon could tolerate it long enough to sit through. And the demon found that during the worship service was when it did its best work. For example, when the minister preached about God's grace, it liked to whisper things in the man's ear like, "God's love isn't for you;" or, "Admit it. You know you're beyond saving. You're nothing but a worthless wretch." Then the demon would giggle in delight as he watched his human host shift uneasily in his pew and feel miserable.

One this particular Sunday, the demon was having an especially fun time disturbing the soul of the man he hitched a ride with. "You're no good. How could God possibly care about you? Don't even think about trying to get into heaven because you're not welcome there." The man began to shift and squirm in his pew. And this made the people sitting next to the man shift and squirm in their seats and wish that he would settle down and relax. The demon, of course, was delighted that he was able to cause so much disruption and disturb so many people in church. Because it made it harder for them to hear what God was trying to say to them.

But the demon's glee was short-lived. Because just as it was patting itself on the back and feeling a sense of triumph, it happened. The preacher began to talk about Jesus. And his man-host began to listen. Not just listen superficially, mind you, but truly listen. And the words were actually getting through to him.

"In Mark's Gospel," said the minister, "we read about a man who was possessed by an unclean spirit. The statement that he was possessed means that the man belonged to the unclean spirit. He was under the demon's total control. The demon was completely in charge of the man's life. Most likely that was because the man allowed the demon to be in charge. In effect, the man handed over control to it. The demon did all the steering, and the man was simply a passenger who went along for the ride.

The minister went on to say, "The man was surely a good, religious man, like us. We know this because he faithfully kept the Sabbath by worshipping at the synagogue. This tells us that even good, church-going people like us aren't immune to the demonic influences all around us.

Now, to be clear, said the "there's a big difference between being possessed by a demon like the man in Mark's Gospel was said to have been, and being swayed by demonic influences. I think when we read about unclean spirits and demons in the Holy Scriptures, the image usually comes to our minds

of movies like *The Exorcist*, where the devil makes the poor young girl's head turn completely around on her shoulders and she swears and blasphemes God and vomits pea soup all over the poor priest. The demon laughed at that along with the rest of the congregation because it knew such unbelievable Hollywood images made demons a lot less believable to people; and the less believable a demon was to people, the more damage it could do to those people's lives.

"Demon possession," said the preacher, "isn't our biggest concern. Rather, it's the more subtle demonic influences we need to worry about.

Now the minister had the demon's full attention.

"There are dark powers and evil influences all around us that can enter our hearts if we allow them to, and they can subtly, gradually nudge our lives away from God and the godly lives we have been called to live. These demonic influences can sap our spiritual energy, drain our faith and rob our souls of the abundant and joyful life Jesus wants to give us."

"Don't listen to him!" the demon whispered into his man-host's ear. "This preacher doesn't know what he's talking about!"

"These are the kind of dark influences I'm talking about," said the minister. "When we live selfishly, only for ourselves, and always put ourselves first, even when it adversely effects the well-being of others, I would call that demonic.

"When we judge others harshly and condemn them for their failings and shortcomings while refusing to examine ourselves and the quality of our own righteousness and ethical behavior, that's a strong indication that the powers of darkness have prevailed over us.

"When greed and overconsumption rule our lives at the cost of keeping others poor, hungry and in need, a devil is in control of our hearts.

"When we choose to live without forgiveness, without reconciliation, and we hold grudges and refuse to resolve differences with others who are estranged from us, evil has succeeded in having its way.

"When we allow hatred, injustice, prejudice and unrighteousness to exist and we don't speak out against it and fight it tooth-and-nail, a demon may have entered our hearts and is influencing us for the worst and causing a separation between us and God."

Now the demon in the man's heart was frantic. The minister's sermon was hitting the nail on the head, and he heard the man he had hitched a ride to church with breathe a sigh of relief.

The next statement the minister made was the *coup de grace*, the final nail in the coffin, the stake through the heart.

"When we doubt God's love for us and don't believe we're worthy of

God's gift of divine grace, it's not a bug in our ear that's whispering, but a whisper from a demonic power that wants to do everything possible to get us to believe we're worthless and unlovable in God's eyes."

The minister looked out at the hushed congregation. After a pause to let what he had said sink in, he said, "Are you wondering if a demon has hitched itself to you and is influencing your life? There's a way to tell, or at least it can give us a good indication that one possibly did. "When we hear our Savior speak to us through the Scriptures and we fear for our lives and our existence, that's a strong sign that we're under some kind of demonic influence. And remember, I'm talking about demonic influence, not demonic possession."

So, when we hear Jesus say to us, "Love your enemy and pray for those who persecute you" and we shake our heads in revulsion; when we're told by our Lord to forgive those who wrong us not seven times, but seventy time seven times and we vehemently reject what he said; when Jesus teaches us not to judge others or else we ourselves will be judged, and we don't blink an eye as we go right on judging others anyway; when Jesus tells us to take up our cross and follow him and we immediately say to ourselves and to Jesus, 'No way;'; if we hear such words of Jesus and a voice in our heart responds with fear, and maybe even resentment, and we find ourselves saying, 'What have you to do with me, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy me?' then maybe we have a demonic hitchhiker with us and we're under its influence. Even if we come to church every Sunday."

The preacher was coming to the end of his sermon, which greatly relieved the demon. Who knows how much influence the message had on the man it had come to church with. "My dear friends," he said, "Jesus stated very clearly that God's kingdom had begun in him, the days of evil and darkness were numbered, and the demonic powers were doomed. God's would ultimately crush the devil underfoot and God's reign of justice, righteousness and peace would transform the world. "We don't know when that day is coming, but God promised that it would come. Jesus promised that, as well. The demonic powers would have us believe otherwise. They would tell us that either God lied to us, or God is wrong about the coming of the kingdom of heaven and we're delusional and foolish to believe it. "The question is, who are we going to believe? Who are we going to put our trust in? Will it be the God who gave us life and light, or the demonic powers who want to bring us death and darkness?"

"I implore you to believe God," said the minister. "Believe Jesus. Believe that evil has met its match in Jesus, and ultimately, God's love will prevail. One day, and may that day be near, the Kingdom of God will come and Jesus will reign. Then the ways of God will be written on humanity's hearts, and the

demonic influences that have tormented us will be no more.

“As the inspiring hymn *A Mighty Fortress is Our God* declares, ‘The powers of evil grim, we tremble not for them; their rage we can endure, for lo their doom is sure: one little word shall fell them.’”

At that point the minister invited the congregation to sing *A Mighty Fortress is our God*. And the man who had brought a demon to church sang along loudly and joyfully. And the demon who hitched a ride to church was terrified, because it knew its days were numbered. In fact, he could almost hear Jesus saying to him even now, “Be quiet! Come out of him!”

Thanks be to God. Amen.