

The Way — The Healing Ministry

Luke 4:31-41

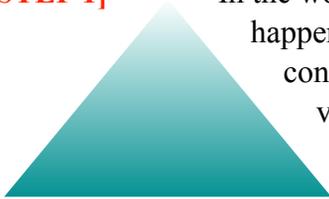
The 2nd Sunday in Lent - February 21, 2016

The Rev. Dr. Ritva H. Williams

[SLIDE 17] Our Lenten journey of walking in the footsteps of Jesus moves from the wilderness of Judea to the town of Capernaum, from Jesus' testing by the devil to Jesus casting out unclean spirits and demons. In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus' healing ministry follows his inaugural sermon at Nazareth. In that sermon Jesus declares that his mission is to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim God's favor, grace, mercy, and love to all people. The folks in Nazareth are enraged by Jesus' insistence that God's favor is not just the people of Israel, but for people of different ethnic groups who worship different gods.

So Jesus walks to Capernaum where he shows us what his mission of release, recovery, liberation, and grace looks like on the ground. At first glance it looks mighty strange to us: a confrontation with a man possessed by the spirit of an unclean demon, rebuking a fever, healing sick people by laying hands on them, casting out and silencing demons who know that he is the Messiah. It's weird and creepy. How do we relate to a Jesus with super powers? What does Jesus' healing ministry have to do with the mission of the church ... with the mission of St. Stephen's? But first, what about the demons?

[STEP 1]



In the world of Jesus, people believed that every significant thing that happened in life was caused by a person. Things that were beyond the control of human persons, such as fertility, disease, weather, earthquakes volcanic eruptions, and so forth were caused by non-human persons.

These non-human persons operated in a cosmic social hierarchy: God/gods - angels (good spirits) - demons (evil spirits) - man - woman - animals - plants and minerals. Accusations and diagnoses of demon possession were based on observed symptoms. Deviant behavior that was non-productive or destructive of human life and relationships was the work of demons, a.k.a. unclean or evil spirits. So in the world of Jesus, a man who has a habit of crying out with a loud voice at inappropriate times and falling down as if thrown down by some unseen force is regarded as possessed by a demon. The matriarch of a family who suddenly comes down with a high fever and is unable to run her household is understood to be the victim of a demonic assault. What is needed is a healer, a shaman, a holy man or woman, a priest or prophet, who with the help of spirits and gods higher up the chain of being can command these demons, drive them out and silence them, so that the afflicted person can be restored to normal functioning within their family and community. The ancient world was filled with such persons. Sometimes their efforts were successful. Sometimes they weren't. By all accounts, Jesus was a particularly successful healer.

[STEP 2] Our world view is different — rather than a cosmic social hierarchy, we view reality as a web of interconnected relationships. God is inside and outside of all that exists, always enfleshed and enlivening creation yet always more than and bigger than the entire universe, simpler and more complicated than anything we can imagine, yet always for us. We explain the sudden onset of a woman’s high fever, not as a demonic attack, but as a bio-physical reaction to exposure to a bacteria or virus. We explain the behavior of the man who cries out and falls down, not as demon possession, but as resulting from a combination of bio-chemical, physical, psychological, emotional, social and spiritual interactions. We turn to medical practitioners and therapists to heal our bodies, psychiatrists and psychologists to heal our minds, counselors to restore our relationships, pastors and spiritual directors to meet our spiritual needs.



So does that mean there are no demons in our world? When I think of demons I do not imagine Hollywood images of scary creatures that cause us to vomit and spin our heads (a la The Exorcist) but rather those forces within us and around us that are destructive and death-dealing. How many of us know people whose health, relationships, and careers have been destroyed by addictions to alcohol, drugs, gambling or pornography? How many of us have watched the socially approved demons of workaholism, affluence and greed seriously damage the health and relationships of people we know? How many of us have been so possessed by anger and rage that said and did things we later regretted? How many of us us have been possessed by jealousy or envy that has led us use our gifts and resources in ways we wish we could undo? How many of us have made the lives of family members or coworkers miserable because of some hidden prejudice or bias? How many of us are paralyzed by fear and anxiety? **[STEP 3]**

Yes, there are demons in the world and we recognize them by they do. To borrow the words of Professor David Lose, “Rather than bless, they curse; rather than build up, they tear down; rather than encourage, they disparage; rather than promote love, they sow hate; rather than draw us together, they seek to split us apart.”¹ They are life-destroying and death-dealing. They are the very opposite of God. They are way more complicated than Hollywood makes them out to be.



[STEP 4] You may have heard this quote before, “The church is not a museum for saints but a hospital for sinners.” We are a fellowship of broken, needy people who gather week after week yearning for healing, comfort, and hope. To paraphrase Professor David Lose, God does not want our lives to be ruined by anger, fear, workaholism, substance abuse, prejudice or any other life-destroying, death-dealing force. Hence, God draws us together, gathering us in Christ’s name to support each other in

¹ David Lose, “Possessed,” available at <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=1608>

escaping from the demons that take hold of us, pouring the Holy Spirit into our hearts to help us grow to be individuals and communities of people blessed to be a blessing.² It is here through the proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ that we learn we really are God's beloved children, worthy of love and respect, capable of making a positive difference, no matter what the rest of the world says to us or about us, no matter how physically or mentally or spiritually broken and needy we might be. It is also through the proclamation of the gospel that we hear the call to follow Jesus, to walk in his footsteps, to become wounded healers. Some of us do this by pursuing careers in as doctors, nurses, therapists, counselors, social workers, chaplains, or pastors. But all of us are healers when we provide mutual support to one another, sharing a comforting word with the grieving, serving someone in need, drawing another hurting human being into a deeper relationship with Christ. Sometimes this healing work is quick and dramatic, more often it is a long slow process. And so we offer praise and thanksgiving to our everlasting God, who does not faint or grow weary, but gives power to the powerless, strengthens the weary, and renews the strength of all who wait, lifting them up to soar like eagles (Isaiah 40:28-31). Amen.

² David Lose, "First Things First," available at <http://www.davidlose.net/2015/01/epiphany-4-b/>