

# Sermon: Epiphany 4

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January 28, 2018

Year B  
Deuteronomy 18:15-20  
Psalm 111  
1 Corinthians 8:1-13  
Mark 1:21-28

I don't think I've ever encountered anyone who was possessed by a demon... but I have encountered evil... expressed in the life damaging words... and actions... of some people... fortunately... I've never met most of them... I've also encountered spiritual evil... an ominous presence... in a room in an old mansion in Long Island... at night no less... and biblical scholars are confident... that at least in some instances... references to possession really describe mental illness or psychological dis-ease... which ancient societies may not have dealt with any better than ours does... but movies like The Exorcist cement certain images in our collective consciousness... and give them life... by giving them stage directions... and scripts... and makeup... and background music...

Movies about incarnate evil... have informed our ideas about the devil and evil spirits... the way Cecil B. DeMille's The Ten Commandments has informed our image about how Moses parted the Red Sea... but there is embellishment... an exaggeration of sorts... Hollywood wants these things to be spectacular... to increase the box office... but that doesn't make them real...

I don't think I've ever encountered anyone who was possessed by a demon... but David and Louse Turpin... who live outside Los Angeles... shackled and tortured their thirteen children for years... starving them... depriving them of water... letting them shower only once a year... taunting them with food they could not reach... this is evil... but thank God... one of the teenage girls escaped last Sunday... and called 911... and her twelve brothers and sisters were rescued... and are being cared for... they will probably need therapy for years... and their parents were arrested... and their bond is \$12,000,000... each...

And what Larry Nassar... the former USA Gymnastics and Michigan State University doctor did... to at least 150 women and girls over the last two decades... is evil too... and I don't know if it matters much... whether we call things like these... demon possession... or mental illness... or something else... what matters is what these adults did... and who could have predicted it...

Our reading today from Deuteronomy... is relevant... not I think... because it talks about prophecy... but because it says... *any prophet who speaks in the name of other gods... that prophet shall die*... our reading today from 1 Corinthians... is relevant... not I think... because it talks about eating food sacrificed to idols... but because it says... *no idol in the world really exists... and that there is no God... but One*...

So Simon and Andrew and James and John... walked away from their nets and boats... and went with Jesus to their synagogue in Capernaum... to worship the One God... and suddenly... that homeless guy... showed up... you know... the one who couldn't hold down a job... the one who sometimes sat at the city gate begging for alms... the one who fell through the cracks of the welfare system... the one from a different nation... of a different race or religion... the one who was gay... the one who'd been spit on... or beaten up... or who was taunted with food he could not reach... the one who was emotionally abused for so long... he could not imagine for the life of him... why anyone would really care about him at all... and Jesus taught as one having authority... and not as one of the scribes...

How then... did the scribes teach... I think they were expected to enforce the letter of the Law... and didn't see through to the spirit of the Law... because we know that over and over again... Jesus is challenged by those in authority... about following ritual purity laws... about eating with unwashed hands... about healing on the Sabbath... about not rescuing your child or ox if they fell into a well on that day... maybe the authority with which Jesus taught... had little or nothing to do with what he said... because what mattered... is what Jesus did... and he acted with compassion...

In today's Gospel... it's interesting that the man first asks Jesus... *what have you to do with us...* *have you come to destroy us...* in the plural... and in Mark 5:9... when Jesus heals the demoniac at Gerasenes... he asks his name... and he says... *my name is Legion... for we are many...* I wonder if this plurality... is a way of naming... not that there were many separate demons... but that there are many systemic evils from which people suffer... classism... racism..... ableism... ageism... heterosexism... nativism... colonialism... and maybe the worst one of all... the one that pulverizes any sense of self-worth you may have been able to hold on to... the one that would make someone say... *have you come to destroy us... the way everyone else tries to...* I wonder if the worst evil... is the one that says... don't touch him... don't even get too close... he's not even a human being at all... and the way a person who's treated this way might feel... the way the Turpin children might feel... is embodied in the image on our bulletin cover...

The Gospel doesn't say anything about how the man was different... but we know how people are... we can tell... we know how we are when someone pays attention to us... when what we think... and how we feel... matters and is valued... we know how we feel when someone helps change the systems which have kept us from providing for our family... and we can now provide for our family... when those who could not marry... can now marry... when those who could not vote... can now vote... when those who had no access to health care... now have access... when those who were at risk of being deported... can now stay with their families... we know how we feel when once upon a time... blacks had to be outside of the city limits at night... and now they can live in town... we know... because we want to share with others... the Good News that has been shared with us... we know...

So I wonder if... *the other gods...* referred to in Deuteronomy... and if... *the so-called gods in heaven or on earth...* referred to in 1 Corinthians... are really the false gods too many in our culture worship... like ego... money... and power... to avoid compassion... the ability to use positions of authority... like Nassar did... and use others as our

emotional washing machines... dirtying and denigrating them... so we can feel cleaner and better about ourselves... maybe there are evil personal beings... who exert direct and lasting negative influences over individuals and communities... but there is certainly an evil... that is more systemic... and which functions through transpersonal forces...

Fr. Michael Simone... of the Society of Jesus... wrote... *we all know leaders who speak of values... but fail to embody them... who promise clear guidance... but use their power instead to serve their ego... it's easy to wonder what to believe... and to let a sense of anxious confusion affect all aspects of life... those disciples who can live in Christ with authenticity will... through word and example... deliver others from this anxiety and all the trouble it brings... then we... like Christ... can teach and heal with God's own authority...*

And Bp. Satterlee reminds us... that when Jesus calls... when Jesus invites us to fish for people... we must proclaim the Good News... stand up to the forces which work against it... and proclaim love... life... death... and resurrection... and then as co-creators with God... who know that other so-called gods don't really exist... we can help heal each other... and the world...

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