

Willow Glen UMC January 29, 2012 "Demons and Dementors"
Mark 1:21-28

If you listened to the Gospel reading, you might be asking just what the people in Capernaum were asking, "What is this?" "This" is an exorcism. Like in the movies. OK, not like the movies. I'm too young for *The Exorcist*. At the time the movie came out, I was watching movies like *Herbie the Love Bug Rides Again*, and so if you start talking about unclean spirits, I'm liable to think you've been reading too much Harry Potter.

Here's my disclaimer. I'm a little sensitive about stories of demon-possession in the Bible, and there are quite a few in the New Testament, such as the story about the boy in Mark 9 who was for modern readers clearly suffering from an epileptic seizure. For the sixteen years that I had epilepsy, I was keenly aware that until the late nineteenth century my condition was viewed as a case of demon possession. So, it's tempting to write off all mention of demons in the Bible as an ancient misunderstanding of either brain injury or mental illness.

Tempting, but not totally satisfying. Because there are demons of darkness in our world. Our baptism ritual says so. Today, we asked Ellie and Drew's parents, "Do you renounce the spiritual forces of wickedness, reject the evil powers of this world, and repent of your sin?" Whoa! Methodists don't often use language like that.

I'm not sure what is the best way to explain the "spiritual forces of wickedness" to a twelve year old or to her parents, for that matter. When I went to seminary, I took courses in God, not Golum. I have a degree in divinity, not demonology. I never took a course in the dark arts. There's Harry Potter again.

I'm not a huge fan of Potter, but maybe we can learn something about real demons by considering some fictional dementors. The dementors in the Harry Potter series were originally prison guards in the wizard world. But they fell in league with the evil Lord Voldemort. This is how Remus Lupin, Hogwarts's Professor of Defense Against the Dark Arts,

describes them to Harry: "Dementors are among the foulest creatures that walk this earth. They infest the darkest, filthiest places, they glory in decay and despair, they drain peace, hope, and happiness out of the air around them... Get too near a Dementor and every good feeling, every happy memory will be sucked out of you. If it can, the Dementor will feed on you long enough to reduce you to something like itself...soulless and evil. You will be left with nothing but the worst experiences of your life."

Dementors. They remind you of every ex-boyfriend/girlfriend you had in college, don't they? Fits your last boss to a "T" really. And maybe you hear that soul-sucking sound on your way to your in-laws at Thanksgiving. It's only January and you're already dreading it.

Harry Potter may be fiction, but wouldn't you agree that there are a lot of dementors in this world that will consume our souls if we let them? Not just the ones that take the shape of

other people, but the ones that take shape in us: there's mental illness, yes, but there's also all kinds of afflictions and addictions, there are physical ailments and chronic, unmitigated pain. But the pain isn't just inside our bodies; it's in the world outside as well, in the form of joblessness, homelessness and all the like forces that lead to the same place, hopelessness.

These demonic forces don't just attack individuals, but whole societies get trapped in their sticky, soul-killing, interconnecting webs. And these webs have names like racism, sexism, classism, tribalism, terrorism. Their greatest weapon against us is fear. What's the flavor of the month: homophobia, xenophobia, Islamophobia? Their greatest achievements in this world are poverty, injustice, oppression, war.

There are demons/dementors everywhere. And if you think about it for even one minute, it's all so overwhelming. Mighty Fortress author Martin Luther thought a lot about it. He knew all about the world with devils filled. He knew about the

Prince of Darkness grim. But he also knew that "we tremble not for him. His rage we can endure, for lo, his doom is sure; one little word shall fell him."

One little word. What is it? [Jesus] Do you believe that? You once said you did. Again, the ritual of baptism asks, "Do you accept the freedom and power God gives you to resist evil, injustice, and oppression in whatever forms they present themselves?" You who have been baptized, do you realize that you have already been given the freedom and the power to disempower the spiritual forces of wickedness, the demons and the dementors of this world? Because you were baptized into Christ: Jesus, who astounded everyone who heard him in that synagogue in Capernaum because he taught as one having authority, and not as the scribes. And then he proved that he authority even over the unclean spirits. If we are baptized into Christ, if we follow Jesus, so do we.

After all, what is the demon of poverty in the face of the

people of God? What is injustice, oppression, war—all tools of the trade for the Prince of Darkness—when confronted by the followers of the Lord of Light? What was slavery to Sojourner Truth? Racism to Martin Luther King, Jr.? Injustice to Cesar Chavez? Apartheid to Nelson Mandela? My friends, faith in God is the only thing that has ever defeated any of these fiends.

The truth is that the world is still devil-filled. But by the grace of God, we are faith-filled. And that, Ellie and Drew, is all it takes. If a dementor decides one day to go after you, it won't stand a chance at getting you, because God's already got you. God loved you first and God will laugh last.

So, unclean spirits, evil powers, forces of wickedness, demons, dementors—whoever you are—we're putting you on notice. Yesterday, about a 100 of us from three churches made 400 lunches. We bagged 20 large garbage bags full of warm clothes. We made dozens of nutrition teaching kits for the county health department. Today, after church, we're

heading out and handing them out. The dining halls for the poor aren't open on Sundays midday, so we're bringing a meal.

No, we're not going to destroy poverty today, but we aren't going to let that particular demon destroy us, either. By the way, the demons' other great weapons besides fear: despair and apathy. No, we are not overwhelmed by the enormity of this evil. We are rather astounded by the immensity of the good. God is good. All the time. So we are not overwhelmed and we shall overcome...someday.

So what is this? A new teaching? No, it's the old, old story of Jesus and his love and, by the grace of God, it will not let you go.