

“The Lord is gracious & full of compassion.”

A sermon by Reverend Alice Marcrum
4th Sunday after Epiphany, 2006

Today’s gospel may seem rather jarring to some of us here today. Talk of demons as real entities seem rather foolish in our world of science and modern technology. We may even be embarrassed that we have to listen to a story about ***demons*** as real beings. After all, in our sophisticated world, we of a rational mind consider demon possession to be an ignorant belief of people who do not understand mental illness.

So today’s gospel from Mark comes to us over the ages as an almost mythological story. A story from people who did not have computers, cell phones, space shuttles, trains, automobiles, I could go on and on, but I think you probably have the idea. Yet, I tell you that this is a very important story, because it teaches we of the scientific age that there is a world that cannot always be proven by scientific means. This is the world of the spirit in which principalities and hierarchies that are invisible exist. It is the world in which battles take place that affects the visible world in which we live and work in everyday.

These battles go back to when the Archangel Lucifer was thrown out of Heaven, along with his followers, for making war against the Almighty God and became known as Satan. St. Jerome and the early Fathers of the Church believed that the Book of Isaiah gives us some insight into the outcome of this battle of evil and good. I am using the King James translation for this reading, because it uses the name Lucifer, Satan’s original name instead of the meaning of the name of Lucifer.

***“How art thou fallen from Heaven, O Lucifer, son of the morning!
How art thou cut down to the ground, which didst weaken the nations! For
thou hast said in thine heart, I will ascend into heaven, I will exalt my
throne above the stars of God: I will sit also upon the mount of the
congregation, in the sides of the north: I will ascend above the heights of
the clouds; I will be like the Most High. Yet thou shalt be brought down to
Hell, to the sides of the pit.”***

Now lest any of us say, “Well that belief was then and not now”, I ask you to consider our human hunger for movies and books about the spirit world which includes demons and angels. Our own parish is named after the Archangel Raphael, who is believed to be second in command to Michael the Head Archangel both of whom are good angels, who work for the One True Living God. Perhaps those of us who still doubt the existence of good and evil in the form of angels and demons need to consider taking up a petition to have the name of

this parish changed – Just a thought. I happen to believe in angels and demons so I just want to give you a heads up on where I stand on the matter.

As to where Jesus stood on the matter of the existence of Lucifer, we can turn to the gospel of Luke in the story about the amazement of the seventy of whom He sent out to minister to the people. When they returned they were delighted over their successful mission saying, **“Lord in your name even the demons submit to us!”** Jesus then replies to them, **“I watched Satan fall from heaven like a flash of lightning.”**

So while we, who are oh so much more educated and sophisticated than the everyday person in Judea of the first century, we do need to listen to the words of at least Jesus and His validation of the reality of the existence of Satan. Now if you are with me and other Biblical scholars on this matter, then the belief in demons and angels is not a big step to take. However, if you are still struggling with the existence of spiritual beings, then I ask you to at least acknowledge the existence of good and evil. This in itself is a big step in today's standards of right and wrong that does not acknowledge any moral compass except the intellectual belief of moral relativism, which allows for any behavior that is accepted by the majority or the most powerful leaders of the culture. However, that is another sermon that we will not go into today.

For today, let us look at the reaction by a person, who was either mentally ill or demon possessed. However we want to view this person, it is clear that the man was tormented. Yet, even in his pain filled state, there is a recognition of the Incarnation of God in the being of Jesus of Nazareth.

Mark writes that the man cried out these words, **“What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God.”** By naming Jesus as the ‘Holy One of God’, he is calling Jesus the *Anointed One* or the *Messiah*. When Jesus heals the man of his affliction - be it mental illness or demon possession, those who witness the healing are amazed. This is the turning point for Jesus. It is because of this miracle of healing that Jesus becomes famous **“throughout the surrounding region of Galilee”**.

Now what does all this have to do with we who are living in the 21st century. Is it just an interesting historical point of Jesus' ministry? Or is there something more to the story that affects us in our daily lives.

Well, let's look again at what happened. Even if some of us do not believe in demons or angels, there was a miracle of healing that took place. Even in today's sophisticated world of medicine, doctors tell us that there are some healings which they cannot explain. I believe that if this particular healing had taken place today that it would probably fall under that heading, because by scientific reasoning it is unexplainable.

It is unexplainable, however, only if we do not recognize Jesus as the Holy One of God, the Messiah. If we take the leap of faith and acknowledge Jesus as the Messiah, then the healing that happened to this man is understandable. Because nothing is impossible for God, it is only a small step of faith to accept that this healing took place and was initiated by One who had the power of God inside of Him.

The joy that comes from this acknowledgement is the knowledge that we have as Christians that the same Jesus who healed this tormented man continues to heal people today. We call it a miracle, but for Jesus it was a simple act of love to deliver this tormented soul from his pain. Jesus, who took compassion on this tormented man, loves us and wants us to be healed also.

We need but have the faith of the tormented man, who recognized Jesus as the Messiah and knew even in his pain filled mind that Jesus could heal him. That same Jesus is waiting for us to cry out to Him for help. It may be even a negative cry such as the one in the gospel story today. Even that is enough to initiate the power of God in our lives, because it recognizes that Jesus is Lord over all.

We do not have to live a life that is torn asunder by torment and pain. Jesus is waiting to heal us. All we need to do is acknowledge this incredible concept that defies the knowledge of this world, but complies with the Word of God. God loves us and wants only the best for us.

He sent us His Son to overcome the Evil One so that we might have life and have it more abundantly. When we allow the Evil One to win, then we are not even letting God have a chance to help us. It is only when we let go and let God that we can enter into the life of fullness that God desires for us. As the psalmist says, ***“The Lord is gracious and full of compassion.”***