



making God's love visible in downtown Memphis

The problem with demons
4th Sunday after the Epiphany, Year B
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My problem with believing in demons weren't that I couldn't get my head around the idea of demons.

Sure, the images we had of them were silly — red-horned and spike-tailed figures lurking in the corner of the room, whispering through blackened lips and forked tongues on the other side of your shoulder. But those were easily dispensable and not my problem with demons.

It also wasn't that I couldn't imagine a sinister, destructive force at work in the world. It seems like all the best stories humans have ever told point to a struggle between the forces of good and evil, whether writ large in the epic fantasy of Tolkein or the Faerie Queene, or minutely and tortuously defined in a single soul, as in Dostoevsky.

It doesn't take a long glance around the world to know these sinister, destructive forces live outside our story-telling. We have secularized names for them now: we speak of them as systemic, like poverty or racism or greed, things so dark and entrenched that the armies of good have fought and struggled against and given their lives combatting for countless generations. And of course these impersonal, systemic forces result in the harm of personal and tangible humans. I am unable to think of a baby starving to death and naming it as anything but evil, a great and horrifying wrong, any more than I can look at a friend with his newborn held tenderly in his great arms and call it very good, call it a gift from God.

And my problem with believing in demons wasn't even that I couldn't imagine that there could be a personal aspect connected somehow to these forces of destruction. Many Christians I have known wrote off the demon stories with a line you will have heard: "Oh, of course it was just a misunderstanding of epilepsy or mental illness." Which, first of all, is a terrible thing to tell anyone with epilepsy or mental illness, for the record, and a gigantic misunderstanding of the point of the demon stories in the Bible. But if I had met demons in modern times, I would say they were just as present in every day folks without a diagnosis. The way a news channel turned a mother from her daughter, the way he nurses that grudge til it's all he remembers of the relationship, those conversations you've had trying to talk her out of staying in that abusive relationship — and she stays, the way he cuts and runs in the moment that matters, like his father before him.

And the way it only takes one fearless moral inventory, one deep and searching look inward, to see the same anger, and greed, and sloth, and lust, and melancholy, those same ingredients of evil stirring around in the pot of your own soul, their flavors sometimes more pronounced than others. At least that's how it works for me.

There's only been one hitch in my acceptance of demons, and it was this last part. That maybe these worst things about us... were really just us. That the evil we continue to do to one another, to the planet,

to our souls, was just what humans were about, no outside influence, no shoulder-whispering demon necessary.

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Let's see what Jesus has to say about that. In our gospel today, Jesus walks into the temple and teaches. He's interrupted by a man with an unclean spirit, and of all the learned and spiritual folks in the room, it's only the demoniac who recognizes Jesus for what he is -- the Holy One of God.

A man with an unclean spirit would've tainted the entire congregation with his uncleanness. People like him were kept outside the Temple to maintain the purity of those inside the walls. It's not a stretch for us to imagine a system that works like this. We've built our world around making classes and types of people invisible.

Jesus does not drive him out from the temple walls. It is as though he sees the man, the real one, not the shouting, writhing display that was the demoniac. Jesus sees the man and he restores him to himself. It is as though the worst parts of him were not actually him at all.

Demons are one way Christians have talked about this idea that really, the essential *you*, past your mental and psychological baggage, past the body and its abilities, past the mood fluctuations and mindfulness exercises, deep down past your DNA and your questionable wardrobe choices, there is a you. Of course, we're careful to say all of those outside things matter in the growth of a soul, you are an embodied being -- but that there's something intrinsic and wholly good at every person's core. We call it the image of God. Sometimes this image is hidden, obfuscated under complicated and interwoven layers of choices and influences. But it is there in *you* — and everyone who has ever lived.

CS Lewis wrote a fantastic little book called *The Screwtape Letters* about an elder demon writing to give advice to a novice demon whose it was job to corrupt a man's soul. The man dies in a state of grace, and the elder demon recounts furiously what took place when that soul slipped eternally through their scaly fingers:

There was a sudden clearing of his eyes (was there not?) as he saw you for the first time, and recognised the part you had had in him and knew that you had it no longer. Just think... what he felt at that moment; as if a scab had fallen from an old sore, as if he were emerging from a hideous, shell-like tetter, as if he shuffled off for good and all a defiled, wet, clinging garment. By Hell, it is misery enough to see them in their mortal days taking off dirtied and uncomfortable clothes and splashing in hot water and giving little grunts of pleasure—stretching their eased limbs. What, then, of this final stripping, this complete cleansing?

Did you mark how naturally—as if he'd been born for it—the earthborn vermin entered the new life? How all his doubts became, in the twinkling of an eye, ridiculous? I know what the creature was saying to itself! “Yes. Of course. It always was like this. All horrors have followed the same course, getting worse and worse and forcing you into a kind of bottle-neck till, at the very moment when you thought you must be crushed, behold! you were out of the narrows and all was suddenly well. The extraction hurt more and more and then the tooth was out. The dream became a nightmare and then you woke. You die and die and then you are beyond death. How could I ever have doubted it?”