

Encountering Darkness

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time, January 26, 1997. Scripture Lessons: Deuteronomy 18:15-20; Psalm 111; 1 Corinthians 8:1-13; Mark 1:21-28.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

Over 20 years ago, *The Exorcist* was playing to packed movie theaters. This story of demon possession swept the nation. What I found interesting was that after a generation in which theologians tried to explain away demons purely in psychological terms, people were paying good money to see a movie in which demon possession was taken seriously.

The earliest Christians took demon possession seriously. They preserved stories of Jesus casting out demons. We read one this morning. Jesus had just preached a powerful sermon in a Capernaum synagogue. Then a demon-possessed man appeared in the congregation. A raving man shouting vague threats at Jesus.

"I know who you are," he howled. "You're the Holy One of God."

"Shut up," Jesus said. "Come out of him!" The man fell to the synagogue floor. His arms flailed wildly at the air. His legs thrashed about. People moved back to give him a wide circle. He frothed at the mouth. He uttered strange cries. Then, like the stilling of the storm on the Sea of Galilee, the man became calm and serene and lay very still. Slowly he picked himself up off the floor. His face now tranquil. His eyes clear. His voice quiet and peaceful. The people in the congregation had just witnessed a scene to rival anything in *The Exorcist* (Long).

him suggest hellishly that his son commit suicide? Jesus came to destroy that kind of demonic darkness.

The second story of demonic darkness comes to us from M. Scott Peck, a Harvard trained psychiatrist and best selling author. In the spring of 1972 he was chairman of a committee appointed by the Army Surgeon General to recommend ways to prevent future MyLai massacres.

Some of you remember MyLai. On the morning of March 16, 1968, an army task force of about 500 soldiers moved into a small group of hamlets known as MyLai in South Vietnam. The purpose of the mission - search and destroy Vietcong soldiers. MyLai was considered a Vietcong stronghold. The civilians were believed to be aiding and abetting the Vietcong.

When Charlie Company moved into the hamlets of MyLai they discovered not one combatant. None of the Vietnamese were even armed. Not one person fired on the American soldiers. They found only unarmed women, children, and old men. What happened next is unclear. What is clear, however, is that at the end of the day the troops of Charlie Company killed five or six hundred unarmed villagers. They were killed in a variety of ways. Some troops simply stood at the door of a village hut and sprayed into it with rifle fire, blindly killing those inside. In other instances villagers, including children, were shot down as they attempted to run away. The first platoon of Charlie Company herded villagers into groups of twenty to forty or more. They were then slaughtered by rifle fire, machine gun fire, or grenades.

The killing took a long time. It went on throughout the whole morning. Only one person tried to stop it. He was a helicopter pilot. He could see what was happening from the air. He landed and attempted to talk to the troops but to no avail. Back in the air again, he radioed to headquarters and superior officers. They seemed unconcerned. He gave up and went about his business.

The number of soldiers who actually pulled triggers was probably small, maybe about fifty. However, approximately two hundred soldiers stood there watching. Five hundred men knew by the end of the day what had happened. The troops were familiar with the Geneva Convention which makes it a crime to harm any non-combatant, or even a combatant who has laid down his arms. Some of the troops were aware that orders in violation of the Geneva Convention are illegal and should not be obeyed. Nevertheless, not one soldier reported that war crimes had been committed.

After Peck's investigation, he wrote, "My profound suspicion is that they did not confess their crimes simply because they were not aware that they had committed them." And then he asks, "How can a sane man commit murder and not know he has murdered? How is it that a person who is not basically evil may participate in monstrous evil without the awareness of what he has done?"

If we're honest I think we all realize that, at times, we've been possessed to do and say and think evil things. Sometimes in a group of people we find ourselves doing and saying things which afterwards, when we're alone, frighten us. We ask ourselves,

"How could I have done that? How could I have said that? What possessed me?" And sometimes, when we're alone, we find hellish thoughts and feelings overpowering us. Afterward we ask ourselves, "What possessed me to think that or want to do that?" If we're honest, we've probably personally confronted powers of darkness in the world.

The powers of darkness, the devil and demons, are what God did *not* create. God *didn't* create them. Nevertheless, they exist. They really exist as the shadow of what God has created. The powers of Satan and the demonic exist as a shadow exists. Shadows have no reality in and of themselves (cf. Barth). And yet, how powerful shadows can be! Shadows can scare us. Shadows can control and possess us. Maybe we've all experienced what William Willimon calls "some dark, unmentionable, irrational terror at the heart of things" that causes "a chill to go down" our "spines".

When we're confronted with this kind of darkness we need a power greater than our own will power. A Christian is not someone who's able to overcome the power of darkness by the power of our own wills. Rather, a Christian is someone who knows a powerful story, the story of Jesus. His story assures us that the powers of darkness have been decisively defeated. The very words of his story are so powerful that they can and do defeat the powers of darkness.

Our main task as a church is to proclaim his story to all. We Christians gather in church to tell his story and to celebrate our deliverance. Evil is still present among us and in us. But

But are there really demons? Can people still be demon possessed today? More importantly, does the Risen Christ still cast out demons?

Listen to two stories, contemporary stories of demonic darkness. The first story takes place in a church meeting. Church people had gathered for a workshop on homosexuality. Following a presentation chaos broke out. Angry shouts and threats. A man in his mid-thirties attempted to get the floor by shouting, "I wonder if I could give a testimony here!" The crowd turned to hear him. He told this story.

"I was married with children when I finally had to tell my wife that I was gay and could no longer live a lie. Soon, I went to tell my parents. Sitting with them in their living room where I had grown up, I told them that I had been gay from the time I was aware of such things, and that I had to be honest with them because I loved them. When I finished my father went to the closet and took a revolver and a box of cartridges from the top shelf, loaded the gun, walked over and placed it on the lamp table by my chair, and said to my mother: 'Come, dear, let's give our son some time by himself.'" With that his mother and father left the room (Tex Sample).

No matter what you believe about demons or about homosexuality, that man's story forces me to ask, "Was there something more going on with his father? Something other than feelings of hatred? Something more sinister? Is it possible that some irrational, hateful force had taken control and made

the story of Jesus and his defeat of demons tells us that evil is a defeated power. We meet in church to remind ourselves of what we so easily forget - Jesus Christ is Lord. "God raised this Jesus from the dead, vindicating his sinless life, breaking the power of sin and evil, delivering us from death to life eternal." No earthly or demonic power can finally withstand or defy the living God who has come to us and will come to us in Christ.

Let us pray: O God, grant that standing in your strength against the powers of darkness, we may so win the victory over all evil suggestions that with singleness of heart we may ever serve you, and you alone; through him who was in all points tempted as we are, your Son Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.