

**Sermon** January 26, 2024  
[Mark 1:21-28]

*Is the Demonic a Distraction?*  
Pastor Dan Peterson

Grace to you, and peace, from God the Creator and from Jesus God's Son, the Christ our Lord. Amen.

As you know, I am not one to shy away from controversy. Today's message is meant to provoke and stimulate your thinking about something that most mainline Protestant pastors, myself included, do not address enough, do not address thoughtfully, do not address as it needs to be addressed. And that topic is the demonic.

"The world seems fascinated by the devil, but bored by God." Let me repeat that. "The world seems fascinated by the devil, but bored by God," writes John Clark of the *National Catholic Register*.

"That's as backward as it gets," he continues. "C.S. Lewis once commented that of all his books, writing *The Screwtape Letters* was the only unenjoyable assignment he had; one that was dry and fatiguing."

And so, when we see movie after movie about the paranormal, or about the demonic, of which I am the first to admit my guilt; when we hear more interviews about it, more podcasts, it might serve us well to ask: Why are we giving the devil so much attention?

Why are we giving the devil so much attention? What is it about evil that we find so alluring, so attractive? Why are we giving the demonic, that is the devil, so much attention?

Well, the first answer may surprise you. And it's this: We give attention to the devil to increase church attendance! As Joseph Laycock, a religious studies professor at Texas State University writes, "Exorcism has become more mainstream in Catholic culture as well as evangelical and Pentecostal culture. A 2013 YouGov poll found that" – listen to this – "51% of Americans believe in demonic possession." (At last, an issue the simple majority of the country can agree upon) "But at the same time, Catholic church attendance continues to fall. This trend reflects a larger pattern of cultural polarization in America, between growing secularism and an increasingly conservative fundamentalist religious culture."

"In fact," Laycock continues, "exorcism has played an increasingly prominent role in the culture war. In 2018, a Chicago priest was removed from his position by his bishop for saying a prayer of exorcism while setting fire to a rainbow flag".

For much of the 20th century, however, the Roman Catholic Church saw exorcisms as something of an *embarrassment*, not a tool for drawing people back to church. Leaders saw it as superstitious, as anti-scientific, as anti-modern.

It's no surprise after William Friedkin film "The Exorcist" came out in 1973, that Juan Cortez a Jesuit priest and psychology professor at Georgetown University, told *Newsweek* that he did not believe demons exist.

But the popularity of “The Exorcist” reveals an opposing trend. Laycock continues once more: “Ironically, as the church tried to modernize, the counterculture had a growing interest in the occult, popularizing books and films that paved the way for “The Exorcist.” The film suddenly became a social phenomenon,” (Most of you can probably remember seeing it or hearing about it.) “and suddenly, priests were being inundated with people demanding exorcisms. William O’Malley, a Jesuit priest who had a role in the film, described this surge to the sociologist Michael Cuneo in the following way:

“I was teaching at a Jesuit High School in Rochester at the time,” he says, “and for a while the phone wouldn’t stop ringing. They called looking for an instant fix; pleading with me to expel their own demons, their kid’s demons, even their cat’s demons. It’s not that I rule out the possibility of demonic possession. As the saying goes, (he’s quoting here from Shakespeare) ‘There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy.’ But this movie, “The Exorcist,” seems to have set off some truly strange vibrations.”

Truly strange vibrations. Now I happen to know William, or Bill, O’Malley. He is a former colleague of mine and at Seattle University, and he was a friend. He died this summer at 91 years old. I even have a signed book that I purchased about 20 years ago by him: *God, the Oldest Question*, one of 37 books he wrote during his lifetime. I love the way he characterizes the issue. And I agree.

Like O’Malley, I remain agnostic when it comes to the reality of the of demonic phenomenon. There are indeed “more things on heaven and earth that are dreamt of in our philosophies.” And while I pride myself as somebody who follows the dictates of scientific methodology, I do leave room for at least the possibility that these things occur.

But “The Exorcist” did something that hadn’t been done before. It taught audiences the five main signs of demonic possession, which in turn crept into modern culture:

Number one: Speaking languages otherwise unknown by the person speaking languages, otherwise unknown by the person. In the movie “The Exorcist” the language is Latin, of course.

Number two: Demonstrating strength beyond the normal capacity of the person. In “The Exorcist,” this occurs when the young girl who is possessed convulses and shakes the bed in ways that a young child should not be able to.

Number three: Elevated perception, and having a knowledge about things they shouldn’t have.

Number four: Resisting anything sacred – that would include, of course, holy water or the crucifix.

And finally, number five: Exhibiting violent behavior, as well as “manifestations.” Now, manifestations are what we typically associate with exorcism. These would include the rolling of the eyes backwards, the eyes turning black, the convulsing that I

talked about a moment ago, even foaming at the mouth. This is the phenomenon of exorcism, and O'Malley, while he believed that such phenomenon exists, wasn't willing to commit and say that it was because of the devil. It could be, for example, due to a mental illness, or other scientifically explainable phenomenon. Either way, it's out there.

Now this morning, I'm not going to discuss exorcism or possession as a tool for Queen Anne Lutheran Church's evangelism. I don't think that's a good way to bring people back to church! I'm not doing so, moreover, as an expert. In Lutheran seminaries, pastors are not taught the rite of exorcism. None of us have been exposed to such a rite in this tradition, and that's because, as far as I know, there is no such rite that exists.

If, on the other hand, I had gone to a Catholic seminary, the likelihood of my exposure to the rite of exorcism would of course, been much, much greater. In fact, beginning in the early 1920s, every Catholic Diocese – that is a synod, region of the Catholic Church – required one of its priests to be an exorcist that fell out of fashion as I mentioned a few moments ago as the church attempted to modernize itself. But again, beginning in 2004, the rule was reinstated. So today, every single Diocese of the Catholic Church is supposed to have an exorcist. I, however, am not one. So please don't call me to exorcise you, your children or your cats.

The reason then, that I'm discussing exorcism today is that the lectionary demands it. Our Gospel reading for today speaks about exorcism and demonic possession throughout the paragraph. I'm doing this, moreover, because, for too long, I believe, mainline Protestant churches like ours have shied away from the topic. And because of that, they've ceded all discussion and talk of evil over to conservative, evangelical, fundamentalist Christians.

I get why. We don't want to be seen as "those crazy Christians." We don't want to be seen as being superstitious or anti-science. And these are reasonable concerns. But I do think there's a way, a qualified way, to talk about the demonic such that it illuminates the context in which we find ourselves today. In what one conservative author called "this present darkness."

To do that we must understand demonic possession as it occurs in Mark 1, again, our Gospel reading for today. Let's start with the broader context. While the Hebrew word for the demonic occurs only twice in the Old Testament, once in Deuteronomy 32, the other in Psalm 106, both of which connect it with child sacrifice, and rightly so; it appears dozens of times in the New Testament, especially in the Synoptic Gospels, that is Matthew, Mark, and Luke. The word demon is the English translation of a Greek term *daimon*, originally referring to one to any one of numerous vaguely defined spiritual beings, either good or bad. So in Greek culture and religion, a *daimon* can be either good or bad. (I believe, if I remember correctly, it was a *daimon* who inspired Socrates, or at least drew his attention.) In the New Testament that term, however, is reserved for evil spirits who are opposed to God and God's people. In the King James Version, demons are referred to as devils. But in most other English translations, the

word devil is used only for Greek *diablos*, not *daimon*. Thus, there is one “devil”, but multiple “demons.”

We see evidence for this in verse 24 of our Gospel reading, take a look. Going back – to actually 1- 23:

“Just then, there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit (now, “unclean spirit,” “evil spirit,” a “demon” – these are all used interchangeably in the New Testament. ) And he cried out, what have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us?”

So note here, the reference to the demons in the plural – one devil, many demons – and of course, we know the name, at one point, for a collection of those demons, and that is “Legion.”

Here, it’s important to note the context in which the exorcism Jesus performs occurs. It is not an isolated spectacle. It is not meant to increase attendance at the local synagogue! It’s an indication that *the Kingdom of God has arrived*.

Miracle stories like exorcisms, in other words, have a purpose, from which they should not be disconnected. They reveal the dawning Kingdom of God, which is fundamentally a *social* phenomenon. Which in turn raises the question: *What if the demonic is a social phenomenon as well?* What if the demonic is a social phenomenon as well, as opposed to an individual spectacle? For an answer, I turn, perhaps not surprisingly to some of you, to the theologian Paul Tillich.

Now since I’ve been at Queen Anne Lutheran, people have wondered why I refer to Tillich so often, and the answer is twofold.

First, like Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Tillich was on the right side of history. A Lutheran theologian, he was among the first to stand up to the Nazis in the early 1930s. Later in life in an interview he gave for *Time* magazine, he said he had “the honor of being the first non-Jewish intellectual dismissed from a German university for openly defying the Nazi regime.” So, one: He was on – however flawed – on the right side of history.

Number two: More than any other theologian, Tillich gave me a language to conceptualize the Christian faith, a language; and this language includes the demonic. For Tillich, the demonic – and I want you to hear this closely – is a “form-destructive power.” A form-destructive power, the kind he witnessed as it spread across Germany. This form-destructive power exhibits, on a social scale, the fifth sign of demonic possession, according to the Roman Catholic Church: violence.

We see a profound example of the demonic in terms of its social manifestation in the crucifixion of Jesus according to the Gospel of Luke, listen closely:

After Pontius Pilate asks if the crowd would like to free Jesus, they all shout together “Away with this fellow! Release Barabbas for us.” (Luke tells us that this man was a man who had been put in prison for an insurrection that had taken place in the city and for murder.) Pilate, wanting to release Jesus, addressed them again. But they kept

shouting, "Crucify Him! Crucify Him!" A third time he said to them, "Why, what evil has he done? I have found in him no ground for the sentence of death. I will therefore have him flogged and then release him;" but they kept urgently demanding, with loud shouts, that he should be crucified, and their voices prevailed.

So, Pilate gave his verdict that their demand should be granted.

And then we learn, after the crucifixion; after this unspeakable act of brutality and violence, after the death of an innocent man, a prophet of God, according to the Gospel writer of Luke: The mob recognized what it had done. From verse 48:

"And when all the crowds who had gathered there for the spectacle saw what had taken place, they returned home, beating their breasts."

This is precisely how the demonic works. People in groups are overcome by a force alien to themselves. They exhibit a kind of collective madness, inspired by this form-destructive power that ultimately leads to violence, destruction, and death.

When Luke refers to people beating their breasts he is alluding to Zechariah 12, which says, "And I will pour out a spirit of compassion and supplication on the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem, so that when they look on the one whom they have pierced, they shall mourn for him, as one mourns for an only child, and weep bitterly over him, as one weeps over a firstborn."

This illustrates how the demonic works on a social scale in the world of the New Testament. It is a *collective* phenomenon, a collective madness that works itself through the crowd.

So, what about our time? What can we say about the demonic here and now?

To me, the clearest example of the demonic as a social phenomenon, or form-destructive power in America, was the attack on the Capitol that occurred on January 6, 2021. There we saw the same pattern: a large group of people, inspired by our former president, descend upon Washington, D.C. in one of the grossest acts of violence in modern American history. Later, after multiple people were beaten, brutalized, and, in several cases, killed, the crowd violently entered the most sacred symbol of American democracy, and ransacked it.

Upon the capture of those who participated, we hear the same thing again and again in response: remorse. Remorse. "I wasn't aware of what I was doing," some say. "Something overcame me," others say. "It wasn't me."

And this, dear friends, is how the demonic works. It inspires people to collective violence. It's the source of collective madness, compelling them to hurt, harm, destroy and kill, after which they sometimes, as we saw in the Gospel of Luke, wake up and express remorse.

Again, we saw this in the crucifixion of Jesus. And we saw this in the insurrection of January 6. The demonic is a power that threatens to destroy our otherwise fragile and precious democracy.

Dear Friends in Christ ,when it comes to individual possession, I plead the Fifth. I am not qualified to do an exorcism, nor do I want to. There could be something there, for all I know. But for me, the *real* power of the demonic at its worst is the collective. I believe, therefore, that focusing on the spectacle of individual possession *distracts us from real evil*.

The demonic is much larger than isolated acts of the paranormal. It's a *social phenomenon*, a collective madness that easily spins out of control.

But there is good news. We begin to have power over the demonic when we do as I'm doing now: we name it. When we call it out as the motivating factor behind various groups, ranging from the Proud Boys to QAnon, all of whom have been inspired by an unAmerican former president who faces 91 felony charges, the dictionary definition of a demigod, who continues to wield jaw-dropping power over large swaths of the American population.

In these cases, as Martin Luther once put it, a theologian of the cross "calls a thing what it is;" she identifies and denounces the fascists, the totalitarians, and the Christian nationalists in this country as *vessels of the demonic*, ciphers of the form-destructive power in history.

But she does more than that. She names the alternative, that is, the self-surrendering love of Jesus Christ, that replaces death with life, violence with peace, and self-control over collective madness.

Naming evil and responding to it is what Paul Tillich did in 1932. May we have the courage and strength to do the same.

Amen.