

Jesus cast out demons. He performed miracles, proclaimed the good news of the kingdom of God, and cast out demons. John P. Meier, the pre-eminent scholar on "the historical Jesus", declared in his classic work *Jesus: A Marginal Jew* that Jesus casting out demons is one of the most historically verifiable things we know about him.

Jesus cast out demons. This is a part of the gospel, but how is it good news for us? It sounds fantastic. It conjures up images of winged fiends with horns. It all seems so medieval, like something out of a painting by Hieronymus Bosch. We came to church for worship and a cheesy horror film broke out!

So we say, "That was then. This is now." Back then, if something went wrong or someone got sick, we didn't call the doctor. We called the rabbi and up until a few centuries ago the priest or minister, because we were dealing with a demon. But now, in the age of bacteria and viruses with our Center for Disease Control, we have a pill for every ill, and if we're struggling to cope with the challenges we face, we can get therapy and medication to see us through. Whatever is wrong with us, there is a reason, and reason through the remarkable advances of medicine and psychotherapy is what will heal us, not religion, not calling for an exorcist to cast out our demon.

Let me be clear: As a Presbyterian and a Christian, I am all for quality health care. I see the doctor and take what is prescribed. I've also seen a therapist and taken medication they prescribed. I hope you do too. I am not against modern medicine or psychotherapy, nor do I think that Jesus' casting out demons justifies turning the clock back to the 1700's. I do think Jesus' casting out demons is good news for us; good news we can believe "*with all our heart, soul, strength, and mind.*"

### † What is a Demon?

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When we think about demons, our thoughts owe more to Dante's *Inferno*, Milton's *Paradise Lost*, and the paintings of Hieronymus Bosch than to the Bible. We think of fallen angels who followed Satan in his rebellion against God, but the Bible is largely silent on the origin of demons. The term "demon" occurs in 89 verses in the Bible and the vast majority of uses speak of a demon being "cast out." Revelation

describes three frog-like demons coming out of the mouth of the Beast, but to make this the basis of our understanding is to read too much into the text.

What the Bible does show us is that a demon is a force in our lives and in our world that hinders, harms, and diminishes the quality of our lives. Demons destroy; they bring chaos; they are the implacable foe of the reign of God in this world. Demons defile; human beings are created in the image of God; demons seek to turn us from who and what we are created to be to something less than human; a creature ruled by our appetites, a being at the mercy of what is worst in us and seemingly unable to rise to what is best. Demons are evil. "God is love." Demons are absolutely opposed to the good and loving purpose of God, for us and for our world.

Jesus came to fulfill God's good and loving purpose for us and for our world. Demons have no place in the reign of God, so Jesus casts them out.

"Casting out" presupposes "coming in;" it presupposes demon possession. Horror movies have a field day here, but sometimes truth is stranger than fiction. Consider the following account of demon possession, by psychotherapist and Christian, M. Scott Peck, best-selling author of *"The Road Less Traveled."* In his book, *"Glimpses of the Devil,"* Peck describes an exorcism he conducted on a 27-year-old wife and mother he calls Jersey. Sexually abused as a young teenager, Jersey's behavior in her twenties became more and more erratic. She finally sought help from the family psychiatrist, Dr. Philip Lieberman, telling him, "I'm possessed."

Lieberman referred her to Peck. Their first session focused on informing Jersey of her treatment plan: An exorcism followed by weeks of psychotherapy. Peck writes, "We then went through a whole number of other kinds of support she could have and finished by telling her how we would find a small Christian church community for her to work with."

"Until that moment her face had been quietly impassive, but now, in an instant, it utterly changed. Her mouth turned into a harsh, malicious grin and her entire face was convulsed in a haughty sneer. The expression was similar to what Father O'Connor and I saw when confronting her the day after the failed deliverance, only

now the superciliousness was magnified threefold. The expression could only be called satanic. There was no question whether we were dealing now with the real Jersey. Almost immediately I said, "There seems to be a demon in the room. What is your name?"

"It answered in Jersey's own voice without hesitation: "Damien." Jersey had mentioned the names of many of her supposed demons before, but Damien was not among them. We let it talk for a minute. Its words made no sense. I was not about to be drawn back into this meaningless drivel halfway between sanity and insanity. I commented, "You seemed to appear right when we were talking about a Christian church support group for Jersey."

"I don't want her children to go to church and become sissies," it pronounced. "What they need to learn is karate and self-defense."

"Now that the demon was speaking in its own language, it did not take us long to realize that it was, in fact, a demon of self-defense. Indeed, it shortly even explained its name to us, saying that the *a* should really be pronounced flatly because the name meant "Dam me in." By "dam" it didn't mean "damn," but a concrete barrier through which no enemy could approach."<sup>1</sup>

Sometimes truth is stranger than fiction. Demons exist. They are the enemy of God. They are our enemy. Saying, "That was then, this is now," denying this dimension of reality may be comforting. It may keep our lives and our world neat and tidy and manageable, but that simplicity comes at the cost of accuracy. It's a distortion that deprives us of part of the gospel: Jesus cast out demons.

### † Casting Out Demons

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We don't talk about demons much. That is at it should be. We do theology not demonology. Our focus is on God not on demons. Yet the number of references to Jesus' casting out demons (two in our lesson of ten verses of Mark); the number of references should give us pause.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.beliefnet.com/Faiths/Christianity/2005/01/Glimpses-Of-Demons.aspx#ixzz11KCxLAWh>

Casting out demons was a component of Jesus' ministry on par with teaching and performing miracles. We ignore it at our peril. We reduce Jesus to the level of our comfort zone. We make him manageable and miss the good news that the kingdom of God has come near. We miss a tremendous source of courage, strength, and hope that empowers us as we serve God and neighbor and confront evil in ourselves and our world.

Before your heads start spinning, some clarification: We do this already. We do it every Sunday. We do it every day many times per day.

We pray.

When we gather and look around and see someone that we know has been through a major health issue, someone that we've been praying for, and they are at last well enough to be with us, we rejoice. They are well. And their healing is a sign of the victory of God over the power of evil.

Prayer heals. Healing has a spiritual component as well as a physical component. Just as it is an over-simplification to say that there's a demon lurking behind every ailment, it is also an over-simplification to say that there is no spiritual component to illness.

Truth is stranger than fiction, and it's more complicated. We can leave the cause of the ailment in the hands of God. We should leave it there, because God is the one who heals – through ordinary means like medication and treatment, and through extraordinary means like miracles and casting out demons.

We'll leave the diagnosing to the experts. Our calling is to participate in God's work in the world. We love. We serve. We pray. And day by day, inch by inch, person by person, the kingdom of God re-claims God's creation and evil's rebellion is defeated and cast out.

Evil does not go down without a fight; it doesn't leave quietly. It's a struggle, and that can be discouraging. This is where the fact that Jesus cast out demons is good news for us. It encourages us to persevere, to keep loving, keep serving, keep praying, because "the battle belongs to the Lord." Jesus assures us: "*I have said*

*this to you, so that in me you may have peace. In the world you face persecution. But take courage; I have conquered the world!"*<sup>2</sup>

I was blessed by two examples of that courage when I was in Atlanta two weeks ago. I was at First Presbyterian Church, Decatur, Georgia, the church of one of my fellow pilgrims, Rev. Dr. Todd Speed. They were hosting a church supper and a remarkable program.

One of their own, Rev. Phil Noble, honorably retired, has written a book about the Freedom Riders. Rev. Noble was in the middle of the Civil Rights struggle in Alabama in the 1960's. At one time, he was #1 on the hit list of the Alabama Ku Klux Klan.

The Freedom Riders were a group of African-American's and white's who challenged segregation in the south. Following a pair of Supreme Court decisions that struck down the laws that enforced racial separation, they boarded buses in Washington D.C. and headed south. Prior to their departure they were trained in non-violent civil disobedience so that they would neither retaliate, nor would they cooperate.

Rev. Noble introduced the speaker, a Freedom Rider named Hank Thomas. Hank was 19 years old at the time. The ride went well through Virginia and the Carolinas, but they were warned that there would be violence in Alabama. Hank said:

When I boarded the Greyhound bus in Washington, D.C., May 4, 1961, headed south, I was in search of my American dream — that elusive dream, the dream that the Declaration of Independence's reference to "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness" included me, a coming-of-age black man.

On Sunday, May 14, Mother's Day in Anniston, I received my wake-up call. The ugliness of that fateful day is well chronicled. The 14 of us on board barely escaped with our lives. As the bus was burning, men from the mob, who had just

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<sup>2</sup> *The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version*. 1989 (Jn 16:33–17:1). Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.

firebombed the bus, were holding the door to prevent our escape. They wanted to burn us alive. They had brought along wives and children to witness our deaths. What had we done that was so terrible? Could they have thought they were doing the right thing? Were we a threat to what they perceived as "their way of life?" Did they believe that killing us would make them heroes in Anniston?

Where were you, the good-hearted people of Anniston, when these bullies set upon us? Why did you allow it to happen? Were you as afraid of them as we were? Yet, there was one kind and brave one among you, a little 12-year-old girl, Janie, who brought water and administered to our needs. I believe that she was the messenger, God's little angel of love. This is what I remember first when I recall Anniston. Because of "little Janie," I looked, again, toward the future. I left Anniston with a resolve to learn why God spared my life that day."<sup>3</sup>

Twenty years later, Hank Thomas returned to Anniston, Alabama. The daughter of one of the Klansmen contacted him and asked for his forgiveness for her father. Hank said he would give it, but when the day came, the Klansman did not appear. Last year marked the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of that terrible day in Anniston. The town threw a grand celebration. Hank was welcomed as the hero he is, and the son of a Klansman did appear and ask for forgiveness. Hank hugged him and said that all was forgiven.

Truth is stranger than fiction. Believe the good news. The kingdom of God has come near. Evil is defeated. Love your neighbor. Serve in God's name. Pray.

You are going out now into a dangerous world.  
But walk on with confidence,  
Knowing that your God is with you,  
More powerful than any evil influence,  
More trustworthy than any pretender.<sup>4</sup>

God is with you casting out demons. Amen.

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<sup>3</sup> [http://annistonstar.com/view/full\\_story/13232868/article-Freedom-Rider-Hank-Thomas--Anniston%E2%80%99s-place-in-my-life](http://annistonstar.com/view/full_story/13232868/article-Freedom-Rider-Hank-Thomas--Anniston%E2%80%99s-place-in-my-life)

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.d365.org/todaysdevotion/>