

September 15, 2024
Seventeenth Sunday After Pentecost

“Living the Spiritual Reality”

Mark 9:14-29

I don't often preach about demons. There is a very good reason for this. I don't know a whole lot about demons. The Bible assures us that demons and demon possession is indeed a thing, but it doesn't give us a whole lot of details about how demons function, exactly what kind of power they have and how to detect their presence. We'd like to have some of those details, but we don't. But we know they exist and they want to destroy us, as today's reading makes clear in how the demon tried to cast the boy into the fire “to destroy him.”

However, as Christians in the 21st century, I think we face a particular challenge that puts us in danger and is detrimental to the faith—we don't believe the demons exist. Well, maybe we acknowledge their existence because we trust Holy Scripture as true and it says they exist, but we don't live our lives as if they're a part of our world.

It's kind of easy to understand why. In ages past a hurricane or storm was attributed to things spiritual; the wrath of God. Somebody grabs their chest, keels over and dies and it's the work of Satan. Sorcery, divination, invoking the power of evil spirits, was a thing. But today we have...science. Storms are explained by meteorology. Medicine explains sudden death. Witches, well witches today are more about just being weird than actually doing any sorcery. While we trust in God above and the gifts of grace He lavishes upon us in Jesus Christ, we simply don't tend to view the spiritual world as being active in our day-to-day existence.

We should. God's Word is truth. Satan was cast down to earth and even referred to as the prince of this world. Christ combated demons here and they are still at work here. That whole armor of God passage we heard a couple weeks ago is referencing our battle with such powers. We are to take this threat seriously and take precautions against it.

What precautions? Well, you're off to a good start! You are here today celebrating the victory of Christ over such forces. You are rejoicing in praise to the Savior who has rendered Satan and his demons powerless against the eternal life you have in Christ. You are receiving the Word, that sword of the Spirit, that vanquished these foes with the Gospel truth that you stand as one redeemed by Christ's blood. In Hymnody, liturgy and the reading of the Word the enemy is assailed by the Gospel, vanquished once again in Christ's power through Word and Sacrament.

But then again, this is the church sanctuary, a very spiritual place. We're very comfortable here thinking in terms of that which is unseen, the victorious Christ reigning at the right hand of the Father. The mystical seems natural here, God Himself gifting us Christ in, with and under bread and wine for our forgiveness, life and salvation.

But once we hit those doors, well that's the “real world,” out there right? The physical and tangible is right there in front of us and stuff only happens by rational, tangible forces. At least that's how it seems. If intentional things are going to get done, somebody has to do them. And all of those random things that happen, well there must be rational, explainable, physical forces behind that too. This is our default way of thinking because I think we prefer it that way. It puts us in the driver's seat to take on the crazy world and we can do so according to what we can understand.

But if you consider the world according to spiritual forces, you know, the way Scripture truly reveals things to be, then that perceived control of yours is exposed as an illusion. Yet to do so is actually a very healthy thing. You see, there is a thing called demonic oppression. Not

possession as in a demon taking over a person; oppression as in being under spiritual attack. Acknowledging this reality is important and healthy for the Christian.

I will share my personal story, which is the main reason I'm preaching on this weird topic today. Ever since Hurricane Ida hit, it has seemed that no matter how simple the task I undertake to accomplish, it turns into a major hassle. Bridgette will vouch for me on this because, unfortunately, she's the one who has to listen to me whine about it. I was getting frustrated, depressed and often quite angry and I think it was having a cumulative detrimental effect on my psyche and my soul. A big part of that was because it was "me against the world," right? Of course I was still saying my prayers in the morning and going to God with the "big" things. But the doings of life in general? That was on me because it's just, well, life.

Then I was reading this book that had showed up out of the blue from the LCMS Ministry to the Armed Forces. The author wrote of things angelic and demonic at work in the world. I took it to heart and started wondering, maybe it's not just the world. Maybe it's demons at work, attacking by making everything a hassle in order to drive me to despair? And I'm not saying I'm sure that's what was happening. Maybe I'm just imagining it or maybe it's just stress. But considering that the demonic is a reality and may be at work in my life presented me a single necessary option—going to Jesus, often.

"This kind cannot be driven out by anything but prayer." Theologians puzzle over what exactly Jesus means by these words; that's no surprise since we know little about demons. But when you view your world with eyes open to the spiritual reality, it prompts you to run to Jesus in prayer a lot more because as today's reading makes clear, Jesus has the power and authority to save us from these evil forces. Viewing the world rightly in such a manner is a boon to right faith, because your need of Jesus' protection is then always pretty obvious—there are demons about!

Luther's morning prayer includes the line "Let your holy angel be with me that the evil foe may have no power over me." This is a plea for protection in the spiritual realm that the enemy would be kept at bay, both in things spiritual and physical.

But there is an additional benefit to keeping your eyes open to the spiritual realms in this world—it makes this world somewhat less desirable. If you are not considering the spiritual, well, "the world is my oyster." It's a buffet of pleasures, experiences, riches and adventures. It is very attractive and one of our greatest challenges as Christians is to avoid making idols out of its many blessings.

But when you are cognizant of the spiritual, it loses some of its shine. It becomes a type of minefield in which you are aware of the dangers, the enemy, lurking in the shadows. I'm not trying to paint life as awful, it's not. But you see the forces lying in wait to destroy you. This view not only puts you on guard as you should be, but it also encourages that longing for Jesus to come back and put an end to this threat once and for all. You long for the new life yet to come.

7 a.m. Tuesday morning before Francine arrived I decided to do the first oil change on my new Generac. It's a 30-minute job, max; no problem. It was a complete disaster and I was on the verge of completely losing it. But then I paused and considered, what if the concealing of the oil drain tube, the being given the wrong oil filter, and the impossibility of removing the old oil filter that seemed to be welded to the motor was the work of demons messing with me? That thought, of course, caused me to run to Jesus in prayer, repentantly because of my anger, but more importantly being reminded that my Jesus has saved me for immortality. My countenance lifted and the demons, if they were about, became the frustrated ones. They stand defeated in Christ.

Kind of a weird message, I know. But I do think we need to be reminded that the forces of evil are real. They are here. They want to destroy us. This is true. Jesus says so.

If your rational mind struggles against this, today's reading provides a nice, simple prayer to us: "*I believe; help my unbelief!*" Of course this prayer is first and foremost for faith in Jesus, the crucified and risen Christ. But part of that is to believe that He has defeated all of your enemies, including the present darkness with its demons.

Have faith, believing the truth that all of it is just as God's Word declares. Then joyfully believe His promises as you run to Jesus in prayer, knowing that in Him the darkness has already come to its end.

Amen.