

The First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
“Alive in the Adventure of Jesus: Demons and Miracles”
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January 22, 2017

Luke 4:1-8, Mark 1:21-28

I am afraid that it is time. It is time that we had “that” talk. The talk that your parents were afraid to have with you. The talk that some Presbyterians have in hushed tones, trying not to be over heard. It’s time to have the demon talk. Yes, that’s right. It is time to talk about demons. In some ways this should not have to be a difficult talk because demons are all over the Bible, and especially in the stories about Jesus. And they are in the stories about Jesus because the First-century world believed that demons were everywhere. The demons, according to Jewish belief, were descendants of a wayward angel, who had begotten children with human women. And they were a big family. There were approximately seven and half million demons. Each person had ten-thousand at each hand, right and left. They lived in tombs and unclean places. They lived in the desert and howled. They were around at times of danger such as child birth and at times of joy, such as weddings. There were demons of leprosy, blindness and heart disease. In other words, as I said a moment ago, they were numerous and they were everywhere. Even so, I would imagine, you are saying to yourself, what does this have to do with me. I live in the 21st century and don’t believe in demons. So why have the talk? The answer, I hope, will become clear as we move ahead, but first we have to take a closer look at the demonic to understand.

The role of demons was to inflict harm on human beings. They were, if you will, bent on distracting and diminishing. Demons were intent on distracting people from their true purpose of loving God and neighbor. They distracted people with the temptation of loving only self. Demons worked to diminish the humanity of individuals. They work to slowly erode the image of God in people so that people became less than God made them to be. In a sense they worked against the world God intended; a world in which every human being lived fully, using their gifts to serve creation all the while loving God and others. We can see this in both of our stories this morning. In the first story, Satan tries to distract Jesus from being who God created him to be; the savior of the world. Satan does this by tempting Jesus to focus on himself; his physical needs, his desire to be king of the world, rather than focusing on the mission he had been given. In the second story we see the effects of the demonic in that the man who confronts Jesus is out of control and afraid of God; so afraid that he cannot be the person God has created him to be. This is what the demonic does; it distracts and diminishes so that human beings cannot be those God created them to be.

So, once again, what does this have to do with us? The answer can be found all around us. We are surrounded by the demonic. We are surrounded by those invisible forces which seek to distract us from our mission to love the world as Christ loved the world. We are surrounded by those invisible forces that seek to diminish our humanity and the humanity of others but having us see ourselves and others as less than human. We are surrounded by hate, anger, violence, fear, racism, greed, sexism, homophobia, xenophobia, Islamophobia...and the list could go on and on. These are the invisible forces which seek to do harm to God’s beloved; to individuals, communities and to the world. I say these are demonic, not because they are brought about by little, invisible cartoon demons. I say they are demonic because they do what the demonic does. They come in through the back doors of our lives and distract us and diminish us. They cause us to be less than fully human and they cause us to see others as less than fully human. They do harm to our

relationship with both God and neighbor. To make my point, and I am not looking for hands in the air, how many of us have unfairly looked down upon and judged another? How many of us, have created negative stereotypes about people who are different from ourselves? How many of us have become so angry about something that we are out of control? How many of us have allowed fear to control us? See, we don't need demons to see that the demonic is at work within us and within the world. This reality then leads us to one more question, how do I defeat these invisible powers that seek to distort the person God has created me to be?

The answer to this question, simply put, is that we are to do what Jesus did, we are to do the miraculous. Jesus, when confronted by the demonic, performs the miracles of resistance and restoration. He performs the miracle of resistance, resistance to the temptations that are before him, by remembering what a right relationship with God looks like. Jesus remembers that life is not about self, but about God. It is not about self, but about others. It is not about power but service. This is the miracle of resistance. In the second story he performs the miracle of restoration. The man approaches him, filled with fear. "Have you come to destroy us?" he asks. Jesus response is to drive out the fear and replace it with Shalom; with the fullness of what it means to be a child of God. In some ways this sums up all of Jesus' miracles; resistance and restoration, leading people to become fully human and fully alive.

The gift of God is that we can perform these same miracles. That's right, we can do the miraculous. We can perform the miracle of resistance. We can perform this miracle in the same way Jesus did, by remembering who and whose we are. We can perform this by reminding ourselves that life is not about self, but about God; not about what I want but what others need; not about power but about service. What happens when we do this is that we shut that back door through which the life distorting powers sneak in and take hold of us. And instead we open the front door through which the love and grace of God comes in and reshapes us. We can perform the miracle of restoration. We can perform it by responding to hate with love; to anger with consolation; to fear with hope; to racism, homophobia, Islamophobia and xenophobia with a demonstration of inclusion and welcome. And by so doing we will open the possibility of the transforming love and grace of God to work in the lives of others.

Friday evening, after having watched the inauguration, I decided to go on Facebook. There was a video of a man being beset by a bunch of cute puppies, thank yous from people who had been asking for prayers and lots of ads. But then there was a photo of empty bleachers along the parade route for our new president. Below the picture there was a rather innocuous comment, but below that it said 374 comments. Out of curiosity I looked. What I read were some of the most demeaning and nasty comments I have ever read on Facebook. It was like watching the left and the right lob literary shells at the other side hoping to destroy the other. It was demonic. It was demonic not because they agreed or disagreed about President Trump and his policies. It was not demonic because people wanted to stand up for what they believed. It was demonic because they were distracting and diminishing. They were distracting people from their mission to love God and neighbor. They were trying to diminish the other into a pile of nothing.

My friends this is what the demonic has always done. It has taken hold of us and used us to destroy ourselves. Our challenge is to not let it. Our challenge is to do the miraculous; to resist and restore. It is not easy, yet it is our calling. So here is my challenge to you, to ask yourselves, "How I am performing the miracles of resistance and restoration in all of my interactions with those around me?"