

## **Covid Demons - 2021-03-01 —Dr. Michael Trew**

When Rev Peggy asked me to talk about recovery of mental health, she also sent me Alvin Maragh's Master's thesis; *"The Healing Ministry of Jesus as Recorded in the Synoptic Gospels"*. I am so thankful that it wasn't a Master's thesis on quantum mechanics. I could actually make sense of this one.

Today's Gospel from Matthew was one of these healing stories, and it talks about someone who could not speak; a mute. He is described as a demoniac or demon possessed. Jesus casts out the demon and the man speaks, leaving the crowds amazed. "Never has anything like this been seen in Israel".

The understanding of that time was that certain kinds of illness represented demon possession. I don't recall spending a lot of time in medical school talking about demon possession, let alone casting them out – aka, exorcism. In my medical terms today, I would likely describe this as elective mutism. We usually see that in children and it is the reflection of intense and overwhelming fear. Even if Jesus gave him an entirely psychological cure, the ability to cure this in an instant, strikes me as miraculous.

Perhaps it makes some sense to think about fear and the need for healing, alongside our spiritual lives in the experience of Covid-19. Maybe we can weave in the thread of our inward Lenten journey. It does seem that the last full year has been like a very long season of Lent. We remember where we were or what we were doing or planned to do when everything shut down. We recall our last social event before Covid shot so many plans to smithereens.

It has been a year of losses, self-denial, and retreat, with the occasional gift. That gift might have been found in attending to the backyard birdfeeders or the neighborhood walk. We have lost contact with so many rituals including those surrounding birth, baptism, marriage and of course death and funerals. We have had to adapt in order to maintain some of our routines for worship and, thank goodness we do have them! Rituals keep us grounded in our self and our community.

With all these losses, people have been feeling the strain. There is the ongoing fear of not only catching Covid-19 ourselves, but also the fear of passing it to someone we love and something terrible happening. There are times when the fear of guilt seems more powerful than the fear of death itself. So, fear drives us, isolates us, and we are always looking for some kind of reassurance. We have spent too many hours with the TV or the Internet, looking for reasons to hope, reasons to trust, usually with an anxious edge. For every prediction, be it good or bad, there is a chorus of naysayers. This uncertainty and worry gnaws away at us.

Not only are we feeling stress, we are also separated from the #1 balance to most mental health problems, close human contact. If we share a household with others, this blessing has helped so much

over the last year (the women's shelters remind us that there are exceptions!). For those who live alone, this is been a hard journey. I have agoraphobic patients who tell me that enough of this aloneness!

Statistics keep adding up that we are seeing signs of stress and distress in the population. Studies show increased anxiety and depression in children and youth, as well as with seniors. Alcohol sales are up and we know that with that comes more misuse and abuse. There is the very real financial distress which plagues too many people. I can also report that the demand for counseling services and mental health assistance in emergency departments continues to grow. And we all know that the opioid crisis has grown worse over the last year. It was only in mid-December that the numbers of deaths due to Covid in Alberta overtook the number of deaths due to opioid poisonings in 2020; each ended with over 1100 deaths.

If this has been a year-long Lenten season, I am not sure that our spiritual reflection and learning, the "filling of our Holy Vessels", has kept up with it. Both individually and as a society we have been wrestling with the demons of Covid. What are the signs that we are bending to these demons? Warning signs include irritability, social withdrawal, lack of energy, sadness that is hard to explain, worry, poor sleep patterns, and perhaps a little too much wine. For some people their bodies talk. For me it is always my stomach and indigestion that signals stress. For others it may be headaches, or other body aches or dysfunction that speaks of the dis-ease. All these are signs that we are out of balance with ourselves and the world around this. Our bodies, our minds and our spirits are yearning for something, yearning to be filled.

Let us go back to that story of Jesus healing. It is worth noting that anybody who carries the label of "demoniac" is certainly not welcome for a cup of tea your living room. The very term says not just undesirable, but "bad" in any way you want to use the word - bad. This sounds like somebody who is not just on the margins of society, but beyond the pale. He is who Jesus chose to heal. As with all of his healing stories, it is an act in the service of teaching. Surely part of this lesson must be that there is no one who is unacceptable to Jesus. There is no one who is beyond God's love.

Let me return to the struggles with the Covid demons. So many of these demons have to do with self-doubt and self-judgment. We often balance those negative internal voices with genuine appreciation and love from the people around us. With Covid, we have less access to those smiles and hugs from the outside, and for many people the balance tips and the internal negatives get way too much attention. Is this a sign of mental weakness, of mental illness? Or is this a normal response to abnormal times, a response to the Covid demons. I believe that what I see most often are the signs of normal people living through an abnormal time.

So, what can we learn from Jesus and the demoniac mute, and what can we do?

The first thing that I take from this lesson of Jesus is that no one is beyond the love and care of Jesus and of God. I have met a many people who struggle mightily with fentanyl and heroin – that is opiate addiction. The ones I meet are so incredibly wounded. If I am to learn anything from Jesus it is that each one of these people is worthy of all of the care and the efforts we can offer to help them. Each one of those over 1100 souls who died last year with opiate toxicity were loved and are spiritual losses to our community.

I say these things and most of us do not see ourselves or identify with those on the margins. St. David's is very much in the middle of society. Can we see ourselves in this picture of the demonic mute, or the fentanyl addict? Probably not...

I am reminded of the older brother in the story of the prodigal son. He was feeling left out of the party when the father reminded him that he lives each day surrounded by the life and blessings his father. No big fuss - but so much blessing. I think a little bit more about that older brother and am reminded that he did not sit back and eat bonbons waiting for his blessings. When his younger brother showed up he was out in the field working. I believe our work faces both inward and outward.

I do believe that looking inward can be a source of great strength - as long as we do not judge ourselves. I see many people who judge themselves. Self-judgement is very much a demon, and I have a number of patients who could use a good exorcism. On the other hand, looking inward with love and acceptance is a powerful instrument to take care of ourselves, to fill our Holy Vessel. The more we take care of ourselves the more we can reach out to others with love and acceptance.

The next step of course is reaching out to others as best we can, regardless of masks. The hugs we miss so much will come back but, in the meantime, we need to connect as best we can - through telephone, written word and the ever-present zoom. Thank goodness for these things!

When I say thank goodness for these things I remember a trip through Southern Germany a number of years ago. We stopped in Passau on the Danube River. In an old home in the middle of town we saw a heavy wooden door with another small door built-in to the middle. This was a door for supplies at the time of the plague. Supplies are passed using the proverbial 10-foot pole to protect those on the outside. I can't imagine the waves of isolation and fear that flooded through there in the late Middle Ages. I think of that and I give thanks for zoom, and home delivery.

What else can we do other than being spiritually kind to ourselves and connecting with others? Our bodies are better with routine. Our bodies as well as our minds are better with physical activity; all of those walks outside help our bodies and minds. We are stronger both physically and emotionally when we eat reasonably, when we sleep at regular times and when we pay attention to our blessings. This is a gentle way of suggesting you limit your attention to the news. Some of the most troubled people I treat

are addicted to the news, unable to turn away from it, bowing to the power of the media to make disaster and fear entertaining. Remember the saying; "All things in moderation".

So how to I pull all of this together? Jesus reached out to accept and bless the so-called demoniac. No one was beyond his care. We have our own people who have been ostracized and who suffer and die on the edge of our society. If there are things that we can do to help them, we are called to do so.

Meanwhile we have all been suffering with the demons of Covid; the demons of isolation and fear which have gnawed at our insides. If we are suffering, it is the suffering of normal people in abnormal times. We can help ourselves and I might go even call it God's wish that we simply do what we can; physical activity and daily routine, paying attention to listening and connecting as best we can with others, and perhaps most importantly reaching inside ourselves with compassion and acceptance and love to fill our Holy Vessel. We do this first to accept the blessings which are ours, and then to pass on these blessings to others.

And if I were to summarize all of this in one musical phrase, it just might be:

"Jesus loves me this I know, for the Bible tells me so..."

May you find the blessings of Lent - the filling of your Holy Vessel with compassion and love, to give each of us strength to face the Demons of Covid.

Amen.

- Michael Trew