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FIFTH SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY
February 5, 2006
First English, Austin
Texts: Is.40:21-31; Psalm 147:1-12; Mk.1:29-39

DEALING WITH DEMONS

The demons are real. Oh, we may not call them demons, perhaps because we're more sophisticated, or more knowledgeable, or have a different and more scientific worldview than the people of Jesus' day. But there's no denying that there are many things which possess us, which with or without our consent control and direct our lives, which occupy our waking hours and sometimes our sleeping hours. The demons are real. And if we might hesitate to personalize them as demons, we would, perhaps, be less reluctant to describe them as demonic, because of the power and control they exert in our lives.

For some people it's alcohol or drugs. For others it's work. For some people it's worry, for others fear. For some it's pain, or illness, or some disability. For others it's death, or fear of death. For some people it's self-interest, for others it's ambition or greed. For some it's emotional problems, for others family of origin issues, and for others it's family or marital strife, or loneliness, or depression. It can be anything, which becomes a compulsion or an addiction, anything that controls *us*, rather than us controlling *it*. Thinking theologically, it might be called sin. But whatever it is, it is able to hold on to us with a tenacity that can be frightening.

The demons are real. And the fact that they *are* real can, at one time or another, make each of us feel as if we are sitting atop, if not covered by, the dung heap of life. Because when the demons confront us, or invade us, or catch hold of us life becomes difficult. And when it does a cry which reaches beyond self-pity to the depths of despair, and frustration, and pain can well up inside us and cause us to wonder if we will ever experience anything good again: "What can I do when I'm trapped, when I feel that I can't do anything anymore, when I'm miserable, when I'm (dare one say it)—when I'm 'possessed!?' When the demons have got hold of me, when they control me, and they won't let go."

Now there's no denying that some people's demons (if we may call them that) are worse than others'. And many of the demons that beset us personally may be trivial, or at least relatively minor, in comparison with those that beset others. And recognizing that someone *else's* demons are stronger and more oppressive than one's *own can* help us deal with our own demons.

But not even *that* recognition can totally eliminate the reality of one's own pain, or addiction, or distress, or possession. *We do* at times feel as though we've just landed on top of that dung heap, or that it's landed on us. *We do* at times, with good reason and justification, find ourselves singing our own personal rendition of "Nobody Knows the Trouble I've Seen." *We do* at times sense the demons possessing us and find ourselves drawn much more to the spirit and mood of the Old Testament's "Job" than to the stirring words of praise, thanksgiving, hope, and confidence in God that are found in today's Old Testament Psalm and First Reading.

What that Psalm expresses in *words*, today's *Gospel* Lesson expresses by relating the *actions* of Jesus. In bold and sweeping strokes, Mark, the Evangelist, paints vivid "before and after" pictures. Simon's mother-in-law lies on her sick bed, Jesus arrives, takes her by the hand, lifts her up, the fever leaves, and she begins to serve those present. Later that day, the moaning, groaning, oppressed, and possessed population of the entire city gathers around Jesus, and Jesus

dispels their despair, stills their cries of pain, casts out their demons; and one can almost hear them departing with the Psalmist's words of praise on their lips.

As in last week's Gospel reading, Mark the Evangelist, is once again declaring to the people of his day, and to us, that the Kingdom of God has come into and is still in our midst in the person of Jesus, the Christ. And whatever else that may mean, it *certainly* means that the demons of life with all their handiwork no longer have the upper hand, if, indeed, they ever did; because One who is stronger than they, One who has authority over them, has come, and is on our side.

To be sure, the demons, whatever form they may take, are still around. Even though the decisive battle against them has been won for us by Christ in his cross and resurrection, those demons are still hanging in there, trying. They continue to harass and oppress us. They continue to do their damage, cause their pain, bring about suffering and distress. And when they're cast out of us they often go kicking and screaming, clawing tooth and nail to hang on. And even having been cast out, they seek every possible opportunity to return. And they still prompt us, on occasion, to sing yet another lament about life's pain and hopelessness.

But we know that the lament is not the last verse of the song. We know that Christ has cleared the way for the Psalmist's song of hope, confidence, and thanksgiving. We know that Christ has broken the power of the demons and the demonic. We know, in short, that the *demons* of life do not have the final word, *Christ* does; and it's a word of salvation and freedom from everything that would oppress us and keep us from the wholeness and completeness that God intends for God's people and God's creation.

The demons of Jesus' day knew that. They knew that in Jesus they had met their match. Little wonder, then, that they cried out in fear when they recognized Jesus. Well, if the demons recognized Jesus' power over them and cried out in *fear*, how much more should *we* recognize Jesus' power over them and with the Psalmist cry out in *joy* and *thanksgiving*!?

But there is in all this business of demons and power over them one more matter. Sometimes the demons are cast out of us in ways one could only describe as miraculous; sometimes they're cast out as we're renewed by prayer and by loving relationships with Christ and other people; and *sometimes* we're renewed by God even while we continue to live with the presence of the demons. We dare not forget, as the people of Jesus' day often did, and as we are prone to do as well, that Jesus *was* not and *is* not first and foremost our resident miracle worker, present to cast out *instantly* whatever demon might be deviling us at any given point in time.

Jesus was and is, first and foremost, our crucified and risen Lord who invites us to follow and trust him in all times, in all places, and under all circumstances, demons or not; and whose greatest gift to us is the assurance that in his own death and resurrection the demons of life and of death have been decisively *defeated*, if not totally eliminated, and that no matter what demons take or threaten to take hold of us, complete wholeness is ours as we are renewed by Christ's presence, as we receive life in the waters of baptism and in the bread and wine of holy communion—as we, by God's grace, sharing in Christ's death and resurrection, find that God has “[renewed our] strength, [that we have mounted] up with wings like eagles, [that we] run and [are] not...weary, [that we] walk and [do] not faint.” (Is.40: 31). AMEN.