

28 January 2018  
Epiphany 4B  
Mark 1. 21-28  
Augustine Church  
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Not a lot of us here this morning can remember the days of the evening services. My guess is that if you're under fifty years of age, you've never been to one—at least not in a United Church. I'm not referring to the special evening services, like Christmas Eve or Ash Wednesday; I'm talking about Sunday by Sunday, winter and summer, morning at 11:00 and evening at 7:00.

There was a quietness about the evening service, a stillness...a dimness and a warmth that brought relief from 'the burning of the noontide heat and the burden of the day'...as we used to sing. And at the end, as the minister lifted his arms in blessing, you knew that God the Holy Trinity would guard and protect you this night and forevermore.

Nostalgia, you say. No doubt...except that the evening services did something very practical and helpful, something we have not found a way doing since: the evening services prepared us for death.

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This they accomplished largely through our regular singing of the evening hymns. *Voices United* has two or three of those evening hymns; *The Hymnary* of 1930 has 28.

Now, some of these old hymns were simply cozy and comfortable, even, like 'Day is dying in the West', set to a tune in rocking-chair time:

*Day is dying in the west, heaven is touching earth with rest; wait and worship while the night sets her evening lamps alight Thro all the sky....*

Yet even here, we have the beginnings of what is more explicitly stated in other hymns: namely that the dying of the day can be linked to the ending of our day of life.

Many of the evening hymns made this connection between the gathering darkness and our path towards, as Walt Whitman wrote, ‘the unknown region where neither lamp is for the feet nor any path to follow...’ Probably the best known of them, though, was ‘Abide with Me.’ In ‘Abide with Me’, the connection between gathering darkness and the coming of death is so clear that for generations it was sung at virtually every funeral. But it is actually an **evening** hymn:

*Abide with me: fast falls the eventide; The darkness deepens; Lord, with me abide: When other helpers fail, and comforts flee, Help of the helpless, O abide with me.*

*Swift to its close ebbs out life’s little day; Earth’s joys grow dim, its glories pass away; Change and decay in all around I see; O Thou who changest not, abide with me.*

*Hold Thou Thy Cross before my closing eyes, Shine through the gloom, and point me to the skies; Heaven’s morning breaks, and earth’s vain shadows flee: In life, in death, O Lord, abide with me.*

*In life, in death, in life beyond death, God is with us*

*We are not alone. We **say** it in the Creed; they **sang** it in the hymns.*

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One final aspect of the evening hymns should be mentioned, and that is the connection they make between darkness, death, and the demonic—and that connection will lead us at last to a consideration of today’s gospel....

...which is going to be hard. So I think we should grab the chance for a break before we get into it.

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Emily's kindergarten teacher asked the class to sit on the floor for a minute and think a happy thought. A little later they each told their happy thought and all went well until it was Emily's turn, and Emily said, 'I think I'm pregnant'.

The teacher, to do him credit, kept his cool as teachers have to, and simply said, 'That's interesting. What gives you the idea you may be pregnant?' To which Emily replied, 'This morning my mom came into the kitchen at breakfast time and said to my dad, 'You know, I think I may be pregnant.' And my dad said, 'Well, isn't that a happy thought...'

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So, take a deep breath:

Darkness, death and the demonic: *When in the night I sleepless lie, My soul with heavenly thoughts supply; Let no ill dreams disturb my rest, No powers of darkness me molest.* Or, as the old Collect, the old evening prayer, puts it: *Lighten our darkness, we beseech thee O Lord; and by thy great mercy defend us from all perils and dangers of this night; for the love of thy only Son, our Saviour Jesus Christ.*

When I was a child I was taught the bedtime prayer *Now I lay me down to sleep; I pray the Lord my soul to keep, Thy love stay with me through the night and wake me with the morning light.* But the final lines of the older version were these: *if I should die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take.* If I should die...too tough for children it was thought...so mention of death was eliminated from the prayer. Yet, children wonder about death, and some of them worry...

The evening hymns gave **adults** at least some words to express their wonderings and their fears. We were allowed to consider the possibility that, while intended to be a time for rest, the darkness might nevertheless be inhabited by molesting spirits, by perils and dangers, and by powers that could test our faith and set us trembling. They enabled us to see that the evils in the world were more than a matter of faulty human relationships; we believed that evil is a **spiritual** matter and that spiritual conflict is a reality with which we have to engage.

Now, it is easy for us to dismiss both the demons in Mark's story and the spiritual enemies in ourselves. We can say that while they may have been impressed by evil spirits in Jesus' time, we don't believe in demons anymore. Or we can make the claim that those in the gospels who were tormented by spirits were really suffering from mental illness—and maybe they were, some of them. But at the time we used to make that claim, we assumed that all people contending with mental challenges were institutionalized, and since we **weren't**, since we were 'outside', we were fine. So much for taking responsibility for the enemy we carry in ourselves wherever we go.

The thing is that, whereas the evil spirit that Jesus encounters in today's gospel is loud and obvious and active, the spiritual evils that we have to confront in ourselves are quiet and devious and convince us that they are not part of us at all.

The loud and obvious evils that torment our times are so many and so apparent that I don't need to list them. They need to be confronted with every measure of strength we have and never be accepted as just the way things are. As Martin Luther King Jr expressed it, 'The one who accepts evil without protesting against it is really cooperating with it.'

But the evil **within** is a subtler thing requiring discernment to recognize and discipline to deal with. We have to learn to speak to them with authority, as Jesus did to those tormenting the man in the synagogue that day.

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What kind of authority did Jesus have, and where did it come from?

Well, some might say that since he's God walking around on his hind legs, you've got a question about his authority? Well, the idea that Jesus was divine came later; it was not a topic that would have crossed the minds of those people in the synagogue. **They** were impressed by his **teaching**, astounded by it, we heard today, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes.

Now, nearly every scholar you consult will tell you that Jesus' authority among the people of his time was based on the power of his teaching.

But I want to suggest that his authority came also from his willingness to confront his own demons.

You will remember that after his baptism, Jesus is led into the wilderness where he is tempted, tested by the devil. The devil offers Jesus fame, fortune and power if Jesus will cooperate. Jesus dismissed the temptations, one by one. But I don't think it was easy for him. After all, he's just at the beginning of getting his vocation in life sorted out, and he has to consider all the possibilities before him.

I think there was a struggle. I think that it took courage for Jesus to defeat the evil voices within. He recognized those voices in the raving of the man in the synagogue, and he was able to cast out those spirits because he had behind him the authority of his own courage in confronting them and his ultimate victory over them. The spirits tormenting the man seem to recognize the authority of that victory, and they do what he commands.

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Such is the strange strength of the exemplary person that even the demons cower. Such a one has an authority that is earned through their courage to confront themselves, their refusal to be mastered by the forces that would defeat them.

It's one of the reasons we give trust to Jesus, who did that and kept on doing that, ultimately defeating the temptation to avoid the cross. It may be that we too become worthy of trust when we refuse dominion to the demonic voices that threaten us within.

*Lighten our darkness, we beseech thee, O Lord  
and of thy great mercy, defend us  
from all perils and dangers of this life,  
for the love of thy only Son,  
our Saviour, Jesus Christ.*