

Breathing In the Spirit of God

The Rev. William W. Rich
Trinity Church in the City of Boston
Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany
January 29, 2006

Let us pray. God is love and love enfolds us, all the world in one embrace. With unfailing grasp God holds us, every child of every race and when human hearts are breaking under sorrows iron rod, then we find that self-same aching deep within the heart of God. I speak to you in the name of that love, which is God. Amen.

The spirit of evil, sometimes we joke about it. Think about Flip Wilson's character, Geraldine, popularizing the one-liner, "The devil made me do it." At other times we're morbidly fascinated with it. Think of the wild popularity of the novel and the movie, *The Exorcist*. And sometimes we try to dismiss the subject altogether with a modern sophisticated wave of the hand, "Oh that was just the primitive, pre-scientific view of the world in Jesus' day. No one thinks that way anymore." But at other times we say, "I don't know what possessed me to do or say..." Then fill in the blank of what you wish you hadn't done or said. At those moments we come close to realizing and admitting that there is some deeply mysterious power that can take hold of us and lead us to do harrowingly hurtful things. That can shatter others, leave our integrity in disarray and poison the groundwater of goodness that lies at the heart of the dearly beloved creation God has made and that God still, by indefatigable love, holds in being moment by everlasting moment.

In today's Gospel we encounter that spirit of evil along with Jesus and His disciples. That deeply mysterious power is in a place that may seem the least likely place, right in the synagogue of Capernaum and right in the midst of Sabbath worship, at that. Just as Jesus finishes teaching, with amazing power and great authority, a man, who in our modern parlance we would say, goes off, shouts out. The text says he is possessed with an unclean spirit. Other words to use might be, he is someone in whom the spirit of evil is so strongly at work, that he is not fully in control of himself. Something about Jesus and Jesus' teaching seems to have set him off. He cries out fearfully, and here the translation puts it really much too neatly, when it says, "what have you to do with us Jesus of Nazareth." His words are really much less coherent than that. It's as if he were caught up in a completely fearful confrontational rage and can only stammer, "what is this... you... me?" Ever felt that way?

His stammering reveals that he knows what is at stake here, that he and Jesus are about to duke it out spiritually. And he know who Jesus is, one of God's holy ones, a typical Jewish phrase to indicate someone in whom the power of God is at work. And he knows that this Jesus has God's power, the power of love to silence and destroy evil. In other words, this man knows that the power that has taken hold of him is about to be done away with. His life is about to go through a cataclysmic change.

What are we, who consider ourselves, sophisticated modern 21st century people supposed to make of this? What do we actually believe about the power and the spirit of evil? What do we believe about how it works? After all, every time we baptize we say, when a question is asked, “do you renounce Satan and all the spiritual forces of wickedness that rebel against God?” We say, “Yes, we renounce them.” So if those aren’t just quaint words and if we don’t cross our fingers behind our backs as we say them, what does a spirit mean to us and what does their rebellion have to do with us? What do they have to do with us? What does Jesus have to do with us?

But before we can go answer those questions, we need to understand clearly what the Bible’s picture is of us as human beings. First and foremost, the fundamental, unshakeable view of scripture is that human beings are from the beginning and to the end, good and beloved by God. Second, that God made us in God’s own image and that our calling is to be God’s hands and feet, God’s very breath and spirit at work in the world. Three, that our whole person, body, mind, will and spirit/soul has been breathed into, the literal meaning of inspired, has been breathed into by the Spirit, the breath of God and we have been made good. So we are capable with body, mind, will and spirit if divine goodness, divine creativity, divine love. But there’s a key here that we mustn’t forget. The key is that the way in which we are capable of these things is because the spirit of God has been breathed into us. We are not capable of these things alone and if we stop allowing moment by moment the Spirit of God to breathe in us, then something else may take over, some other spirit that will lead in another direction.

Well, you may be saying, if we are so darned good, then where does evil come from? It’s an old question; it’s a difficult question. This morning I want to go at it only in one way. How is it that that man in that synagogue and we in our time in this church are susceptible to the power of evil and the spirit of evil working in us? What happens to make us vulnerable? If you go and look at the story about this that the Bible tells, the first story; the story of our ancient parents, our first ancestors, Adam and Eve; what that story says is that the central problem, by which we fall into evil, is that we begin to think that we can be good without God. We don’t, any longer, need the Spirit of God to breathe in us to be good and creative and loving. As the serpent led them, so we are led to believe, “I can do it on my own.” And then trouble begins.

So here we are back at this morning’s Gospel story. We don’t know, because the story doesn’t tell us, how this man became susceptible. We don’t know the details of his life, but the story gives us one broad hint. It places him in the synagogue on the day when Jesus takes on the Scribes and teaches in a way that is different from the Scribes. Now the Scribes were the controllers of synagogue life. They were the religious leaders of synagogue life. This man, the Gospel seems to be saying is a representative of all that has gone wrong in the Scribes’ lives. It’s the only hint that the story gives us and it is clearly a story about confrontation between scribal authority and Jesus’ authority, and this man possessed seems to be possessed with what is wrong with the Scribes authority. Now you may be asking, I hope you are, what was wrong with the Scribes’ authority? Why is Jesus taking them on? The Scribes were the preservers of the letter of the law in the Jewish tradition. They were the copiers of the texts. They were the ones who made

sure there was not a jot or tittle missing. And they were the ones, who in synagogue life enforced it, at least in the view of Mark's Gospel. They are the enforcers. They do not teach with creativity or new spirit. They are not open to a new spirit. They are not open to Jesus and this confrontation between the man possessed and Jesus, seems to enshrine the confrontation between them and their way of teaching, Scribes, and Jesus and His way. In modern terms, we might say that the Scribes represent everything about us, not others, about us that thinks that we have full control of the truth and that we already know it and that we do not need God's spirit, thank you very much. They were stuck in a box in their time and we can get stuck in boxes in ours.

One of the boxes we can get stuck in is shaking our finger at them and saying, "weren't they bad?" But that would be to turn this into history lesson and the Gospel is anything but just a history lesson. It is a story for us. And so, as I've said to you before, anytime we point a finger at someone else, remember there are always at least three pointing back at ourselves.

How is it that we get possessed by this same kind of "stuck in the box" spirit excluding spirit. There are two things that come to mind one from our individual lives and the other from our life as a parish. Whenever we are cut off from the breath of God by thinking, "I know who you are," familiar phrase? Right from the Gospel, "I know who you are Jesus." When we think that about another person, be it a spouse, a child, a parent, a co-worker, a friend. When we think we know exactly who someone else is, we have them down, we have been possessed by a spirit of arrogance that cuts us off from the inspiring Spirit of God, that could breathe into us a new way of seeing the person that we think we know so well. Of course, this most often happens, this trap, when we think we are right and they are wrong. When we have the truth and they don't. When we're on the right path and they aren't. And so, if you can identify even one person in your life, one situation in your life, where you're stuck like that, perhaps this morning, you and I, because I certainly can find those places in my life, perhaps you and I can invite the Spirit of God, alive and working here in our midst, just as surely as it was alive and working in the midst of the people of the synagogue at Capernaum, Jesus' spirit to come and free us. To do so, we need to pause long enough this morning, and perhaps each day, to let that spirit in and to move our spirit of arrogant surety out. If you and I are willing to do that, an amazing freedom and newness may come into our relationship with that person that we thought we knew all about already. They may appear in a different light to us. No longer possessed by a spirit of wrongness. And we may appear in a different light to them and our relationships may change. Not by our work, but by the Spirit of God working in us.

But what this story really points too, as you can tell from its setting, is not individual problem, but communal religious problem. So if the synagogues of Jesus' day were controlled by scribal authority, that said there's only one way to think about it, and don't you dare think a different way. And there's only one way to teach the truth of God and don't dare teach it another way, then what is like that in our life? Where are we similarly stuck in boxes of thinking and doing, praying and being? You will have your own answers, you will know where to look, but I have one suggestion. In the midst of this

transition, this interim period between Rectors, one of the things that we have run up against is what could feel like, just a problem. It's our financial stewardship problem. You could say, "a spirit of evil has caused this problem" and point elsewhere to assign the responsibility. You could have your own answer and I could have mine.

But what if we set our own surety, our own independent conclusions aside for a time and said, "maybe this isn't just a problem. Maybe the spirit of God is trying to invade our lives just as surely as it tried to invade the life of the synagogue in Capernaum." Maybe this isn't just a problem, our problem of a budget crisis and stewardship issues, maybe the Spirit of God is working to renew and resurrect us as a parish. What would it be like if we discovered that breath and that spirit moving in us in this crisis? Freeing us to a new vision. What would it be like to come to believe, that despite all the good of the past, the good of the \$53 million dollar campaign of restoration, renewal, rebuilding. Despite all that good, that God has something yet more glorious and better to offer to us right in the midst of this crisis. Could God cast out what seems evil to us and replace it with freedom and goodness? Just as surely as God did in the power of Jesus, in the people of Capernaum and in their synagogue, and in that man who carried the spirit of evil for them. So God can do so today for us. The one they knew as a humble, life-changing nobody has become for us, Jesus Christ, Lord. Will you let Him in? Will I? Will this parish? When we do and when we are changed, let us adore Him. Amen.