

It is really hard to write and preach a sermon the Sunday after Christmas. There's that letdown after all the holiday hustle and bustle and fun. Which of course is right where my birthday lands. Also kind of a hard day to preach on.

Maybe we still just want to stay back at the manger and that scene of shepherds and tidings of great joy. Reading about demons may not seem like a great post-Christmas thing. But among the possible post-Christmas readings in the lectionary is the slaughter of the babies in Bethlehem and the stoning of Stephen. So we're right in line. We are reminded, again, that Jesus came into a world in which the demonic still roams.

The whole point of Jesus' birth was his ministry, so hearing about Jesus actions to bring hope and healing in the midst of the world's brokenness is actually a good post-Christmas exercise.

There are two stories here that are rich and complex. The first shows Jesus authority over the forces of nature. Jesus has authority over creation.

The story of the calming of the storm can be a comfort in those times when we have storms in our own lives. In Mark's version of the story, Jesus says to the sea, "peace be still." That phrase is what I use as my centering phrase when I meditate. It can help calm my mind when I've got my own storms going on.

The second story is equally complex. It's always difficult to preach on demon possession in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. We have largely dismissed the notion of demons and come up with medical explanations instead.

Today, this man most likely would have been diagnosed with some severe mental illness and placed on medication. Modern medications can have a seemingly miraculous effect on things like schizophrenia and severe bipolar disorder.

I think I've relayed the story before of my experience on a psychiatry rotation in medical school. A woman who was severely ill with bipolar disorder had gone off her meds and came in as a quite hostile, scary person. I sometimes think of her when we read this story.

After a couple weeks back on her meds, she'd changed completely and was friendly and pleasant. And no pigs were harmed.

I count among the miracles of God those things we have learned over the years about the body and mind and the healing that is able to happen as a result.

Because of that, we no longer consider things like epilepsy and mental illness demon possession and we can treat them.

But people who have had serious mental illness might feel like demon possession is actually not a terrible image. Pink Floyd, in the song Brain Damage from the Dark Side of the Moon album famously sang “there’s someone in my head but it’s not me.”

And people with mental illness still often struggle under the same stigma and fears of other people.

I think the demonic is alive and well, but different from what’s described in most of the biblical stories about demons. The demons we deal with in our day and age are those that begin in human thought, but seem to take on a life of their own.

Racism, or really any ism that makes us think of a particular group as somehow less than human is demonic. It’s the sort of demon that can lead to holocausts and genocide.

On this date in 1890, the Wounded Knee massacre happened. Nearly 300 cold, hungry, unarmed, and unprotected Lakota were killed by US soldiers at Pine Ridge. My guess is that most of those soldiers were very ordinary people nobody would have said were possessed by demons.

But the combination of power and the dehumanization of the Indians joined forces and grew into a monstrous demon. To this day, the only book I’ve ever read that made me sob was Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee.

Then yesterday in the church was The Feast of the Holy Innocents. It commemorates the slaughter by King Herod of the babies in Bethlehem under two. It was an act committed for the purpose of ridding Herod of the worry over this newborn king, Jesus, that the Magi told him about.

Power, dehumanization, and Herod’s fear helped shape a demon that caused ordinary soldiers to do the unthinkable.

It should be our constant prayer that Jesus will cast out those demons. And we can trust that in the end, those demons do not win.

But we will have our own part to play in the fight against the demons. There still exist those who would have certain groups considered less than human or less deserving of the basic needs for life. That I believe is the entry point for the demonic.

This weekend after Christmas those of you whose Christmas celebrations are done are probably largely resting. If not, I hope there’s some rest coming. Rest is an important part of the life of faith. But then, as author and Christian mystic Howard Thurman famously said,



*The Mood of Christmas* by Howard Thurman

When the song of the angels is stilled,  
When the star in the sky is gone,  
When the kings and princes are home,  
When the shepherds are back with  
their flock,

The work of Christmas begins:

To find the lost,  
To heal the broken,  
To feed the hungry,  
To release the prisoner,  
To rebuild the nations,  
To bring peace among people,  
To make music in the heart."

I hope at least a little of the joy of Christmas remains with you into the coming year. I hope that the coming new year brings some anticipation. Maybe some of you will make resolutions and I hope that you find what you need to make them happen.

My most fervent prayer is that we as the church find our way to do the work of Christmas...to do the work against the demonic...to do the work of new life.