Sunday, February 25, 1973
DEMONS AND DELIVERANCE
Mark 5:1-20

Only a few years ago, biblical stories involving demon possession would have been easily dismissed as being a bit bizarre for contemporary modern scientific people. Not any longer! Witchcraft, astrology, and all manner of strange religious practices have suddenly come into fashion among people who until recently would have rejected them without hesitation.

Today more and more people divine the future with their horoscopes, are still superstitious about the number 13, wear lucky charms around their necks to ward off evil spirits, buy 10 million rabbit foot charms each year, knock on wood and walk around ladders, consult with Jeanne Dixon and other mediums who communicate with the spirits.

Satan has a1so become popu1ar. The church of Satan in San Francisco does a land-office business. A new book has just come out entitled — "The Reality of the Devil." "Rosemary's Baby" and the "Exorcist" are best sellers. Dennis Wheatley's novels of Satanism are airport paperback rack favorites. Recently, the New York Times Sunday magazine carried a feature story on the Devil and not too long ago TIME magazine did a cover story on the occult and its various manifestations, including Satanism.

Some of what's been going on recently carries a grisly side to it. In a cemetery in Florida, heads have been stolen from six graves perhaps to be used in a witch's ceremony. Two men charged with murder recently in Montana and Calif-ornia are reported to have admitted they dismembered their victims as part of a Satanic ritual. In Livingston County, Michigan, a 17-year-old girl was tortured and slain, and those charged with the killing claimed to be Satan's Satanic servants. In New Jersey, newspapers report that Patrick Michael Newell was killed so that he could return to earth as leader of 40 leagues of demons. Charles Manson periodically claims to be Satan.

Undoubtedly much of contemporary American Satanism and demonology is bunkum and hokum and faddish, but there's something behind it all that we need to consider. In times of uncertainty and confusion, the unhappy, the credulous, the vaguely neurotic, and those who are always seeking some form of inside knowledge and control, can find in Satanism a response to their emotional needs.

Furthermore, for too long we have lived with a comfortable, rationalized religion, leaving the mystic, the emotional and what we call the spooky to the ecclesiastical under- world. In the mainline churches there has been little room for the supernatural of any kind, divine or demonic. Both angels and demons have evaporated from our conscious- ness.

C.S. Lewis in the preface to his masterpiece, "The Screw-tape Letters, puts it this way — "There are two equal and opposite errors into which our race can fall about demons. One is to dis-believe in their existence. The other is to believe and to feel an excessive and unhealthy interest in them. They themselves are equally pleased by both errors and hail a materialist or a magician with the same delight."

The point is there are more powers under heaven than philos-ophy, sociology or science dream of, although anthropology knows them well, as does religion. Thus, the imagery or —

belief in demons is an attempt to cope with the mystery of evil, chaos, and destruction, all of which do exist.

Primitive people knew that the mystery of evil was part of everyday existence. The forces of chaos and disorder always were threatening to sweep in, destroy crops or herds, devastate villages, and rip apart the fragile social structure. Human beings were locked in battle with dis-order and evil. People were conscious that they were in conflict with powers much greater than themselves — disease, storms, drought, marauding tribes, conflict within their own community and the ultimate power of death.

We think we are more sophisticated. But have we any more than our primitive ancestors solved the mystery or problem of evil? For an answer pick up the newspaper or watch television — hurricanes, earthquakes, planes shot down, railroad accidents, famines, epidemics, the destruction of environment — physical evil is all around us. But even worse is man's evil to man; tribal and ethnic wars, racial and religious bigotry, torture, epidemics of assassination, kidnapping, skyjacking, drug addiction, large bureaucracies crumpling the dignity of human persons in the blind pursuit of power and profit.

And the magnitude of the evil is often greater than the malice of the people involved — that's the real mystery. Many killers are persons of moderate good-will who in- tend not evil but good. The war in Vietnam on both sides was launched for high-minded purposes, and yet turned into a bloodbath from which neither side was able to extricate itself for years. We talked about destroying villages to save them.

Evil comes from mistakes, miscalculations, limitations, ignorance, far more frequently than it comes from malice. If there is a superintelligence guiding the powers of evil, one must say that his strategy has been brilliant.

Thus, our ancestors were not howling savages with their belief in demons. They were aware of an awesome reality that we have often tried to persuade ourselves had gone away. We've tried to dismiss the demonic element in the Bible as part of a primitive outlook which we've out-grown. Some of the imagery may not say much to us, but the truth which it describes is quite real.

In the scripture passage read earlier, Jesus meets a man who is described as being possessed by demons. He was not in control of himself but seemed to have been taken hold of by some other power. Haven't we felt this way about people at times? Saying that a person is controlled by some other spirits is quite descriptive. Think of a person addicted to drugs: the demons have him!

This man, the Bible says, dwelt among the tombs. He spent his time in the caves and graveyards at the edge of town. His neighbors and relatives had tried to keep him bound up with chains and so keep him subdued so that he wouldn't hurt himself or others. But he kept breaking the chains.

The imagery is saying that the man was possessed by a destructive chaotic power — call it evil, call it demons, call it what you will. He was not in control of himself. His life had lost meaning and focus.

The story is filled with imagery. The demonic in this world is often found among the tombs, among the relics of the past. Some people live only in the past and thus do harm to

themselves and others. This is not to say that there is no place for respectful use of wisdom from those who have gone before us, but it is to say that there is a very great difference between utilizing insights which others have discovered and dwelling among the tombs. For example, a mate separated from his or her loved one by death can in a healthy and creative way cherish fond memories from moments of eternity which they knew together, or he or she can in a sick and destructive way seek to live in a room where not a piece of furniture may be moved.

So, Jesus meets this man dwelling among the tombs, possessed with demons. The first response of the man is — "Don't torment me! Leave me alone!" A strange reaction? We might have expected him to say — "Thank God you are here! Free me from these demons!"

But that expectation does not take seriously how we are all wedded and adjusted to our demons and how painful it is to have them exorcized. Without the demons, the man would have to be held responsible for his own actions. The devil made me do it, is the way Flip Wilson puts it. What strange creatures we are; we so often would rather be destroyed than to have our evil spirits named and called out for what they are. Do not torment me! The cry shows how difficult it is for any of us to change, even when the change is needed and for the better.

What did Jesus do? He asked the voices, the demons in the man to name themselves and by so doing Jesus was saying--"I know who you are." Jesus was acting on the assumption that there is power in simply naming a demon. Demonic spirits are invincible until they are known.

There is a power in "naming." The very act of naming has a therapeutic effect, not only with demons, but with any disorder. In a new book entitled, "THE MIND GAME," with the subtitle, "Witchdoctors and Psychiatrists," the author, a psychiatrist and anthropologist, points out the importance of "naming" a disease or malady or demon. In the very act of naming or diagnosis the patient's anxiety is decreased by the knowledge that a respected and trusted therapist understands what is wrong. Only when we know what something is can we deal effectively with it.

It is sometimes called the "principle of Rumpelstiltskin," the word being taken from the Brothers Grimm fairy tale which illustrates the magic of the right word, of naming. You remember in the story; Rumpelstiltskin is the name of an evil man who wants to take the Queen's baby. The only way the baby can be saved is by the queen naming him correctly. At the last moment she finds the right name--Rumpelstiltskin — whereupon the baby is saved and the queen lives happily ever after.

The naming process can be one of the most important com-ponents of all forms of healing. Every therapist who has ever had the experience of observing a patient's relief after solemnly telling him that he was suffering from idiopathic dermatitis or pediculosis knows how important the name is. It says to the patient that someone under-stands, that he is not alone with his sickness or problem, and implicitly that there is a way to get well.

The author of the book "THE MIND GAME" shows how in all cultures the naming recess is used as a part of therapy. Thus, if you believe in your culture that demonic spirits are the cause of your problem and the healer confirms and names the spirits, you are already on the way to being made well.

In fact, naming and identification are important in all parts of our living. We cannot solve problems until we name them, identify them, until we diagnose what the problems are.

This is especially true in dealing with the power and in-fluence of evil — we have to be able to name the evil--identify it, before we can go to work on eradicating it. And\sometimes it’s quite difficult to tell the difference between what is good and what is evil.

Jesus healed the man. The demons were called out of him. Those who witnessed the event ran back to town to spread the news to the townspeople. And out they came to see. But did they come with joy and celebration at such a wondrous healing having taken place? I should say not. They came with a mixture of curiosity and fear and ended by telling Jesus to “get out.” Here they were, having had a problem with which they could not deal no matter how they tried and yet its solution caused them to ask the healer to leave the country.

What a commentary on we human beings. Always curious about any excitement, drawn to it, and yet so quick to want to return to the old ways, sick as they might-be. We sometimes seem to fear sanity more than insanity — good spirits more than evil spirits.

The people were being asked by the events among the tombs to acknowledge that their life was not their own, that there were possible vast horizons of human experience of \ which they had never dreamed; they were being compelled to rethink reality, and they saw that they would have to sur-render all sorts of ideas and prejudices which they had carefully nourished over the years. That was all just too much. Jesus, get out! They saw in Jesus and rightly so, a disturber and upsetter of their familiar ways. He was an outside agitator. And if he stayed around very long no telling what might happen. He might discover some other demons hiding in some of their closets.

Does that sound familiar? Have you heard people say — "If only those outsiders would stay away, all would be well.”? Our demons might never be discovered and named.

And what of the reaction of the man who was healed? He wanted to leave the country and go with Jesus. How absolutely natural. If he could go with Jesus. he thought. his life would be safe. Avoid the problems at home. Be a missionary to the world!

But Jesus would have none of it. He told the man — "Go home to your friends and neighbors and tell them how much the lord has done for you and how he has had mercy on you.” In other words, you are to be a living witness of the power of God over evil, a constant reminder.

It’s not enough to have the demons cast out, but you are to do more. You are to go beyond your ordinary Sunday church experience and put your newly found self to work. It'. not enough to be converted and revel in your new vision — go home to your friends. Put your vision into service.

Demons and deliverance! The Bible is utterly convinced that the power and influence of evil is real in this world. It matters not too much which imagery is used to describe it, but evil must be seen and named for what it is for only then can we be delivered from it.

And yet it’s not a simple matter. We human beings do not seem to object to prophets of doom for we can see evidence of it. We do not grow angry when it is announced to us that the powers of darkness are making progress on all sides — we sort of expect it. 7.

Rather like the townspeople in the story from the Bible, the kind of leaders we often object to are those who call — us to begin over again — those who can name the evil and deliver us from it. We seem to be afraid of good news.

Religious leaders and political leaders who preach a message of hope are not always welcome for they require of us more than cynicism, more than despair, more than resignation. They require effort, activity, fidelity, commitment. Jesus said to the man — "Go home and tell your friends how much the Lord has done for you."

The angels of light have always had a hard time of it compared to the angels of darkness. And if they persist in preaching their good news to us and naming the demons in our midst, we get rid of them; we shoot them or crucify them. And that's the end of them. Or is it?