

Demon Possession
January 29, 2006
Rev. Nathaniel R. Elliot, Jr

I've often tried to imagine what it was like for that man with an unclean spirit, the one who was in the synagogue that day in Capernaum, as recorded in today's Gospel and its parallel in Luke (4:31-37). What would it feel like to be under the control of a demonic force that had taken over your life? What must that poor fellow have suffered? I try to imagine his feelings and wonder if, at some time or other, I may have had the same feelings.

We don't talk about demons today. Unclean spirits are not part of our conception of the world. Doctors do not treat our illnesses as if we have been possessed by demons. Our counselors, or therapists, look for other causes of the behavior of which we want to rid ourselves. Few today would profess to cast out demons. Demon possession seems a thing from the ancient past, alien to our modern world and our way of thinking about ourselves.

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Ah, but we do have our demons in this modern age. We just call them by other names. We may treat them differently, but there are still those foreign powers that seem to enter our lives and take control. There are still strangers that inhabit our lives and claim them for their own, in spite of our very best efforts.

And we know the names by which we call our new demons. They're familiar to all of us: the demons of alcoholism and drug addiction; the demons of prejudice and hatred; the demons of fear and depression; the demons of jealousy and envy; the demons of loneliness and isolation; the demons of materialism and the drive for power; the demons of boredom and meaninglessness; the demon of insufficient funds to meet all of our obligations. These are a few of our demons and we struggle with these modern demons in one form or another. We know *some* of the feelings that man in the synagogue had in his own struggle and can identify with them. We know

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the powers in us and in our world that seek to destroy human life, powers that would rob humans of freedom and dignity, of joy and purpose.

One demon that you and I and others are likely to encounter is fear. It is an alien force that arises from deep within. The tragic aspect of this demon is its power to prevent us from loving. In fact many will say that fear, not hate, is the opposite of love. Under the power of fear we say and think things uncharacteristic of us in better moments. Under the power of fear we lose our ability to think clearly and act decisively.

Fears of all kinds can take control of our lives: fear of failure, fear of the unfamiliar, of leaving the security of home, of change, of other people, especially those whom we may think are different from us. We fear heights, childbirth, growing old, illness, death, rejection, and withdrawal of love. A husband may fear

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not making adequate provisions for his spouse when he is gone. We may even fear life itself.

Take for example the fear of flying. Some people, who are otherwise quite normal, are horrified at the thought of boarding an airplane. Some have survived only by becoming so intoxicated before the flight that they pass out the minute they are seated on the plane. When the flight attendants help them off the plane, they're amazed they got there so fast. They are controlled by a power that is beyond their *rational* powers. The fear flying is simply one example of the ways in which *all* kinds of fears take control of human life.

Under the power of such fear everything that we value is reduced to so much garbage. Under the power of fear we are capable of attacking those who are closest and dearest to us. Under the power of fear we are capable of hating everyone and everything. Under the power of fear we can even resolve to isolate ourselves

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from anything that seems to threaten us. Sometimes it seems that there is nothing we can do to overpower the fear. It has virtually taken control of our lives.

Jesus spoke with an authority unknown to the congregation of that synagogue in Capernaum. It was an authority they had never seen or heard. It was, of course, none other than the authority of God, that divine authority alone who had power to overcome the possession. Those commanding words of Jesus that day were the words of God: *be silent and come out of him.*

Jesus is still speaking those words today. He is still rebuking the demons of our contemporary world, as he commanded a release of that one precious human life two millennia ago in Capernaum. Listen to those words. They may sound faint, distant and irrelevant to us even as they did to the man in Capernaum, but they are words full of power.

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Listen for that healing, restoring word of God. **Listen.**

AMEN.