

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ Amen.

What might happen to us if we spend our entire lives fighting against injustice and suffering? Would we end up feeling frustrated and helpless over the tenacity of evil? Evil often seems just to sit like an ugly, unmovable blob that we cannot budge or affect in any way. If we spend our lives fighting poverty, discrimination, even slavery and human trafficking, how do we keep our spirits up?

Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was remarkable in many ways, but certainly he was remarkable in his ability to remain strong and even joyful in the face of persistent opposition and evil. Of course, Dr. King had his moments of discouragement and disappointment – he was, after, a fallible, even sinful human being.

But from the beginning of the Montgomery bus boycott in 1955 to his death from an assassin’s bullet on April 4, 1968, Dr. King endured a great deal:

The King family had received several death threats, and their home was fire-bombed; he was once stabbed in the chest; he was arrested and jailed more than twenty times; by the 1960’s, many young urban black-power leaders thought Dr. King’s approach was too weak, too stale, and too late.

But Dr. King was able to endure because he believed firmly in the power of the Gospel of Jesus Christ; he was able to endure because he believed firmly in the tactics of non-violent resistance and peaceful protest; he was able to endure because he believed fully in the causes of civil rights and social justice.

On the day before he was killed, in what proved to be an eerily prophetic speech, Dr. King told supporters, "I've seen the promised land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight that we, as a people, will get to the promised land."

Though Dr. King was an amazing orator and an amazingly effective leader, he was not one to claim more success than had actually been achieved. He knew first-hand the power of hatred and evil; he knew the road to their defeat would be long and arduous. The evil of this world watched as Dr. King lay bleeding and dying on the balcony of the Lorraine Motel – and then evil went back to work.

The evil of the world also took notice of Jesus. The unclean spirit in the man who confronted Jesus in the synagogue at Capernaum in today’s Gospel seems to have represented all of the forces of evil that oppose God’s will for creation. They all elected him as their spokesperson. He could snuff out this threat to their destructive ways.

Did he intend to frighten Jesus off, or prove that Jesus could do nothing to cast him out? He approached Jesus in the synagogue and spouted off trash talk: “I know who you are, the Holy One of God.” “I know who you are” was demon-speak for “I have power over you.” The battle had started. Jesus stared right at the forces of evil. What would happen?

What can contemporary Christians make of this scene? Some Christians read this talk of demons, powers, and unclean spirits in the New Testament and see only a pre-scientific explanation for mental illness, storms, and suffering. Other Christians read this language and take it perhaps too seriously.

Still others find something in this language of the demonic in the New Testament that the 21st-century church needs to hear. Some Christians see in this language a word about an evil that seems real, palpable, active, more than just the absence of good.

Perhaps all Christians can agree that evil seems tenacious and stubborn. Our efforts to eradicate evil seem like weak spitballs bouncing off a hard stone wall.

We declare war on hunger, on cancer, on poverty. Hunger, cancer and poverty seem to survive those wars just fine.

Every new invention seems to open doors for trouble as well as improvement. Computers and the Internet open doors for new types of pornography and bullying. Weapons intended to make war too frightening to conduct end up making war more horrible. We rotate parties in power, but the same problems dig in their heels, refusing to go away.

We might not know exactly how to understand the language of unclean spirits and demons in the New Testament, but we all can understand the ferocity of the battle with evil. Gospel-writer Mark understood that battle as well. Mark placed this encounter between Jesus and an unclean spirit right at the beginning of Jesus' ministry.

Mark used this story to define Jesus' purpose. Jesus had been baptized and had endured his time of temptation in the wilderness. Then right at the beginning of his ministry, Jesus encountered a representative of the demonic forces that seek to destroy, distort, and defeat God's creation and God's creatures.

These forces attack Jesus throughout the Gospel of Mark. For instance, they'll try to kill Jesus and his followers with a storm. But Jesus will show his faith by sleeping through the squall. When he awakens, he rebukes the storm (Mark 4:35-41).

Here in this initial encounter between Jesus and the unclean spirit, everything was at stake. If the unclean spirit had subdued Jesus or resisted Jesus' efforts to cast him out, Jesus' mission would fall flat right there. But Jesus tossed the spirit out with hardly any effort.

Jesus never even broke a sweat. For this scene anyway, Jesus could stand up to the forces of evil even if we can't. Evil seems so complex to us, so defiant of our efforts to eradicate it. Yet Jesus can defeat the front man for the forces of evil with just a word.

We know that this scene does not represent the whole story. When Jesus reaches Jerusalem, he'll face another full array of human evil. He'll face the cruelty of the guards, the political expediency of the religious rulers, even the betrayal of a companion.

Mark does not describe the trial and crucifixion of Jesus explicitly as the work of demonic forces, but from these stories earlier in the gospel, we sense, we know that they are behind the scenes of all the opposition to Jesus.

Even in the Gospel of Mark, which starts out with this decisive victory of Jesus over an unclean spirit, the demonic forces seem too hard to fight. In the crucifixion, however, Jesus surrendered voluntarily to these forces. Jesus told his disciples upfront that his ministry involved suffering and death (Mark 8:31).

Jesus understood his ministry not just as healing and blessing, but also as laying down his life (Mark 10:45). When Jesus seemed to lose the battle, he really just used the power of the demonic forces against themselves. We don't understand the real victory of Jesus until the resurrection. Even after the resurrection, Jesus' followers, who represent the church, run off in fear.

As we move forward in our ministry, let us claim this early victory of Jesus over evil. However we understand this scene, let us see Jesus triumphing over the evil, injustice, and suffering of the creation. If we see this scene as a metaphor for evil, then let us claim Jesus' victory.

If we explain evil in terms of human vulnerability and sociological forces so that we consider the demons only a literary device, let us see in this passage the promise that Jesus can somehow heal the conflicts between us. If we see these unclean spirits as an affirmation of the spiritual dimension of evil, then let us rejoice in the message that however strong that dimension seems to be, Jesus has ultimate power over those forces.

Let us never give up in despair over the seemingly unstoppable power of evil. Even when we grieve and lament the lives lost to the drug trade, trafficking, war or preventable disease, let us not assume that evil has won. Perhaps from this scene in Mark we should learn that Jesus can win victories we cannot win.

When Jesus tells us to take up our crosses, we hear that the forces of evil will cause us great suffering (Mark 8:34). The forces of evil will win many battles. But this early conquest by Jesus ought to teach us that evil will not, will never, win the war.

While we might agree that Dr. King was an effective civil rights leader, we might not all agree about whether Dr. King was effective in living out the call to take up his cross. At the very least, he moved our society and nation to address racism and poverty.

Taking on the evil of the world will bring conflict enough. Really confronting the evil of the world is enough of a cross to take up. We should not feel surprised when we do not see progress. Let us continue the fight against evil, seeking comfort for the grief that evil causes. Let us continue the fight against evil, seeing in this early confrontation between Jesus and an unclean spirit a promise that God fights with us.

In whatever ways we understand evil, let us draw our hope from God's victory, even if that victory lies not just over the next horizon. Even if decades of service and ministry seem not to budge the ugly blob of evil, let us trust in Jesus, who made quick work of an unclean spirit, and who uses our efforts in ways we may not understand for a long time. Amen.

May the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus forever. Amen.

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