

# DEVILS & DUST - OR THE MONKEY ON YOUR BACK

A SERMON PREACHED AT SAINT JOHN'S PARISH, JANUARY 29, 2006  
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Appointed gospel text for the Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany, Year B:

They went to Capernaum; and when the Sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught. They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes. Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, and he cried out, "What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God." But Jesus rebuked him, saying, "Be silent, and come out of him!" And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him. They were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, "What is this? A new teaching—with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him." At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.

Mark 1:21-28

## I. Monkeys

Veteran American rock singer, Bruce Springsteen released a solo album last year with the title track called *Devils and Dust*. To tell you the truth (always a good idea) that's where I stole the title for my sermon. He starts out:

I got my finger on the trigger  
But I don't know who to trust  
When I look into your eyes  
There's just devils and dust  
We're a long, long way from home, Bobbie  
Home's a long, long way from us  
I feel a dirty wind blowing  
Devils and dust.

For Bruce, the song is about the military conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. But the singer's ballad continues:

I got God on my side  
I'm just trying to survive  
What if what you do to survive  
Kills the things you love  
Fear's a powerful thing  
It can turn your heart black you can trust  
It'll take your God filled soul  
And fill it with devils and dust.

If those bloody conflicts -- which realistically have little end in sight -- would appear to be the monkeys on our backs, just consider the international community's more recent problem in the news with the fundamentalist Islamic state of Iran and it's threat of developing its own nuclear option. Meanwhile just this last week, the Administration scrambled to put the best face we could on the democratic election in Palestine, where the upset victory of the new majority party, Hamas, has an armed military component that's considered a terrorist organization; thus making things a whole lot tougher to broker a peace process with Israel.

It's a devil of time; and we're just talking about the monkeys on our collective backs *out there*.

There are a lot of monkeys in Washington these days, of course. One's named Jack, the lobbyist who's plead guilty to illegal influence peddling. And, as a result, there's a gaggle of politicians trying to shake that monkey off their backs. The White House has understandably refused to release photos of Jack with the President. The President's plate is quite full, and he certainly doesn't need another monkey on *his* back.

Back home every major headline has behind it the cause, or causes, of so many problems that beset us. The economic trickle-down effect of major plant closings and workers laid off in the American auto industry is the result, some say, of the costs of employee benefit and retirement programs that broke the companies' fiscal backs.

I'm aware there are those among us in this congregation who work for large companies, whose cyclical downsizing exercises are becoming a familiar routine; it's the monkey on your back. Some tell me you have simply resolved yourself to just living with it and doing the best you can. Perhaps it's not unlike other chronic afflictions with which yet others of you have come to live.

Personally, you may recall I told you the story of two fellas named Randall & Scott who wanted to be *me*, and ended up in jail, charged with identity theft. But I'm still getting notices from credit card companies about credit applications or purchases I presumably tried to make. I've had a devil of a time trying to put a stop to what these two monkeys did. And, those of you who've subsequently told me, "yep, happened to me too," have also told me I could have that monkey on my back for quite awhile. It seems everybody's got a monkey on the back these days.

## II. Devils & Dust

"The devil's in the details," goes an old English proverb. That certainly seemed to be the case this last week, as we all watched the saga of author James Frey and his presumed "memoir," *A Million Little Pieces*, unfold.

James once had a legion of demon-addictions on his back, and his published story of recovery has sold millions of copies; especially once he got golden imprimatur of Oprah's book club recommendation. But then his little story came under closer scrutiny, and was exposed to have some blatant exaggerations. So he went on *Larry King Live*, with his mother beside him, to defend his semi-fictionalized book. Oprah even got on the phone and called in to defend him.

But then there was the further unraveling of it all; stretching the truth to the point of seeming fabrication. He quickly became a monkey on the back of the mighty O, and she would have none of it. She dragged James Frey and his publisher back to her show for a showdown.

His wimpy, whiny feigned excuse for his actions? It was just yet another coping mechanism, he tried to explain, with a litany of confession that went something like, "Yeah, I sorta definitely kinda lied; I guess, yeah, maybe." What was sorta true or sorta false in James Frey's world was far more black and white in Oprah's kingdom.

For Oprah, her empire and brand, built on a straight-shooting, tell-it-like-it-is kind of truthfulness the facts had to add up; and they didn't. The factual *un*-truths were enough to invalidate any legitimacy in a story of redemption and recovery. Oprah felt duped. Quipped one reporter's headline, "Oprah rips author Frey into a million little pieces."

A local TV station had a call-in survey, asking listeners if they thought the publisher should refund each purchaser for the cost of the book? One caller suggested maybe James himself oughta buy back his million little lies. He might be able to afford it, based on the boost in sales as a result of the controversy. And the possible sequel? *A Million Little Versions*?

Now, here's someone who became a successful author of some notoriety, who once was cursed with a legion of demons on his back; but who rid himself of his addictions, and lived to write about them all, save one: the slippery temptation to squeeze somewhere between "the facts," and those deeper truths that we all know run deeper than the surface of things; succumbing to the temptation that allowed him wiggle room in the realms of the "well, yeah, sorta, definitely, maybe."

For the time being anyway, it would seem his credibility – if not his literary career – has crumbled and been reduced to dust and rubble. Again, Bruce the balladeer:

Now every woman and every man  
They want to take a righteous stand  
Find the love that God wills  
And the faith that He commands  
I've got my finger on the trigger  
And tonight faith just ain't enough  
When I look inside my heart  
There's just devils and dust.

Is there any place where the truth is the *truth*, regardless of seeming facts to the contrary? Or, is it all in the end just a matter of devils and dust? It's enough to drive someone crazy. Crazy, like the character we encounter in today's gospel story in the very first chapter of Mark's gospel.

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### III. The Power and presence of Jesus

Here's the set-up and the sequence of events. We've read of John the Baptist's call for a token of repentance and his proclamation of the advent of the long-awaited messiah. Jesus has come along, been baptized by John, received divine appointment by the Spirit, then been driven into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. He returns to pick up where John left off with the message that "the time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news."

In the next sequence of events, which precede today's gospel story, Jesus has just called his first disciples to follow him. Now he's finally ready to begin his brief itinerant ministry. And, for his opening act, he enters a synagogue to teach, but ends up performing a healing miracle: the exorcism of the man with the "unclean spirit."

When Jesus, the peasant rabbi from Nazareth, enters the synagogue at Capernaum, the question in everyone's mind initially may well have been: By what authority does he say whatever he says? Mark tells us Jesus' listeners detected his words seemed to convey unfamiliar authority, "unlike the scribes."

Before long however, commotion breaks out and disrupts Jesus' expository teaching. There's a madman in their midst.

Those who had their wits about them had been puzzled or impressed with Jesus' seeming note of authority. But whether it was his preaching or merely his presence, there was quite a different and alarming reaction from the "unclean spirits;" who ironically are the first in the crowd to recognize Jesus for who he really is.

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***... whether it was his preaching or merely his presence, there was quite a different and alarming reaction from the "unclean spirits;" who ironically are the first in the crowd to recognize Jesus for who he really is.***

"What have you to do with us?" the demons desperately want to know. "Have you come to destroy us?" they cry out from within the possessed man. "We know who you are!" they exclaim in fear and trembling.

Biblical commentators tell us the Greek word for "unclean" has two different meanings or interpretations. First, there was the sense in which "unclean" denoted cultic, ritual impurity; in which case, the possessed man would presumably be barred from the place of cultic worship. He would be separated from the entire worshipping community as being unfit, and therefore unacceptable. In this case, it is no wonder he created such a disturbance in the synagogue.

The other meaning associated with "unclean" -- and which is most often used in the New Testament -- is the notion of moral impurity. He had either acted in such a way that the consequences of his actions resulted in his affliction; or he was simply accursed. Either way, you might say he had a monkey on his back.

The two notions of “unclean” come together in this story, when the afflicted, tormented man intrudes into the restricted, holy place. The “unclean spirits” may have found the synagogue *uncomfortable*, hence the commotion; but more so, they quickly found their closer proximity to Jesus *intolerable*: “What have you to do with us?” Or, what are doing in the same place we are, they want to know?

The insertion of Jesus as the incarnate presence of God into *any* and every place where spiritual estrangement seeks to reside is at the heart of both the gospel message and identity of Jesus. Time and again in Mark’s gospel, we will discover this. This story is about the first – but not the last – of Jesus’ intrusion into the realm of devils and dust.

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When it comes to Jesus engaging the devil in the places of moral “uncleanness” and failure, it is presumed Jesus does not have the home court advantage. Remember the story of Jesus’ temptation in the wilderness? Satan tempts Jesus, offering him all the kingdoms of this world, if Jesus will only subordinate himself to the powers of devils and dust. It’s a test of authority. Who, in the end, holds sway and has ultimate authority over our earthly lives?

But in this first miraculous act of healing the man possessed with the unclean spirit, the greater wonder to be conveyed in the story is implicit in the demonic spirit’s plaintive, rhetorical question: “Have you come to destroy us?” The answer? Jesus’ very presence and person is power enough. And the devil on the man’s back says as much with his next line: “We know who you are. You are the Holy One of God.”

The crowd’s reaction? Astonishment and puzzlement: “What is this? A new teaching?” And something more: “... with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him.”

Mark intends to convey the good news of this gospel message: Even in the realms of devils and dust, Jesus’ words and ways are sufficient to cast out the monkeys in our midst. How might that play out in the real world in which you and I live?

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Joan Chittister, a Christian writer on topics of contemporary spirituality begins the introduction to her book, *Passion for Life: Fragments of the Faces of God*, with these words:

“At its best, life is a confusing complex of *truths in tension*. What work demands of us often diminishes home life. What governments call legal, the church sometimes calls immoral. What conscience requires of us, the world regularly calls foolish. What was once called absolute by many is now seen as meaningless by most. Where is the path through such uncertainties? ... The problem is that life is more than a series of policies or rules or potential approaches to generic categories. ... Life is what happens to us when we find ourselves in the middle of values in conflict.”

The book then goes on to tell the real life stories of what we popularly call “saints” of the faith, but whom she reframes for us as “icons” of the “faces of God.” An icon is an image through which something greater than itself is expressed; in this case, the power and presence of the divine.

Here we have stories of different people from different times and places; but who possess a common characteristic when it comes to dealing with their particular life situation. Figures like Oscar Romero, Mahatma Ghandi, Teresa of Avila, or Francis and Claire, Mother Jones or Thomas Merton. In each case, one could see their world as being filled with devils and dust. Yet each of these “icons” found, in the midst of life’s curses, injustices, cruelty, or loveless *dispassion*, a flame and passion in the One whose power and persistent presence could dispel the darkness in a world of madness. And, in each case, they were regarded as peculiar, often counter-cultural, and -- in the end -- extraordinary.

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Well I’ve got God on my side  
And I’m just trying to survive  
What if what you do to survive  
Kills the things you love  
Fear’s a dangerous thing  
It can turn your heart black you can trust  
It’ll take your God filled soul  
Fill it with devils and dust.

Last fall, Oprah went looking for a story of hope and redemption, and found a million little pieces of it. By last week, all that was left was a devil and dust; and a blatant distortion of facts that in her estimation invalidated any authentic truth. You can’t get there from here, she essentially said. “The truth matters,” Oprah declared on her show; and then added some other familiar lines, which were replayed many times on the airwaves in subsequent days: “You shall know the truth,” she said, “and the truth shall set you free.”

Of course she was quoting from the eighth chapter of John's gospel, when Jesus says to his disciples, "If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free."

Jesus' "word," however, and our liberation, makes a subtle distinction between mere fact and gospel truth. If that sounds peculiar to popular truth-sayers, consider this: Flannery O'Connor, the American novelist of the last century and a Catholic, writing about strange and crazy people who inhabited her world of the American South once made this observation about the peculiarity of Christian discipleship: "You shall know the truth," she said, "and the truth shall make you *odd*."

There is something about the good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ that can be uncomfortably intrusive; particularly if our discipleship places us in a peculiar juxtaposition to those powers and principalities that would presume to hold sway over this world. Yet the gospel tells us it can free us all from the devils on our backs.

Might this yet sound like a "new teaching, with authority?" to the world around us; had we the wisdom, faith and courage to utter it?

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The man with the unclean spirit that day in Capernaum was unwelcome, and considered out of place in the synagogue. But the devil on his back was even more startled to find itself in the unwelcome presence of divine word and authority revealed in the personhood of Jesus. "What have you to do with us? Have you come to destroy us? We know who you are!"

The unclean spirits knew who Jesus was. Do we? Mark's gospel invites us – with the monkeys on our backs – to be, well, *odd*. Like Jesus. And, in doing so – armed with nothing more than the words and ways of Jesus Christ – cast away the works of demons and darkness, devils and dust.

Amen.

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