

WGUMC February 1, 2015 Reading the Bible in Africa
Mark 1:21-34, 39

I have a question for us this morning: if Jesus were to come back today, would we be embarrassed by him? What I mean by that is that Jesus seems to be so ahead of his time in some ways: the way he related to women and the way he included the poor and the outcast in the kingdom of God. But he seems to be very much a part of his culture in other ways: he didn't approve of divorce under any circumstances and he spent a lot of time casting out demons.

Here in the Gospel of Mark we learn that exorcisms were a hallmark of Jesus' ministry. "And he went throughout Galilee, proclaiming the message in their synagogues and casting out demons." [1:39] The practice sounds perfectly medieval to us, but it is not. In fact, casting out demons is making quite a comeback in Christianity these days.

For example, there has been a growing interest in exorcisms in the Roman Catholic Church. In 1999, Catholics

updated their guidelines for performing exorcisms for the first time since 1614. And ever since then, there have been conferences and workshops for training priests. The Diocese of San Jose has an official exorcist, Father Gary Thomas. Someone wrote a book about him and, of course, Hollywood made the movie. [*The Rite: The Making of a Modern Exorcist* by Matt Baglio; movie of same name starring Anthony Hopkins]

The Catholics, however, are not the only Christians who are in the exorcism business. Pentecostals and fundamentalists have been at it, too. The Rev. Bob Larson is a radio and TV evangelist out of Phoenix, Arizona. He started out in the 70's railing against dirty lyrics in rock music. In the 80's he was debating Satanists and performing exorcisms on the air. Today, you can find him on his web site. He will exorcise your demon via Skype for a \$295 tax deductible donation to his Spiritual Freedom Church. And that raises another question: if you don't pay your exorcist, do you get repossessed?

You don't even have to be a minister or have special training to do an exorcism. A prayer group at Brown University performed one on a fellow student. Bobby Jindal, the future Governor of Louisiana, was there and wrote an essay about it in 1994. [published in *The New Oxford Review*.] And Caleb Daniels went to an exorcist because he was a veteran suffering from PTSD. He now works at a Christian camp in Georgia to help other vets cast out their war demons.

I know what you're thinking: there's someone in your life who needs an exorcism, right? Well, save your money and the miles. You can do it yourself with the step-by-step illustrated guide at wikihow.com.

Now for someone who was raised in the Methodist Church in Montana, this is all too weird for words. About the only word that comes to me is *why*? Why does exorcism hold such a fascination for us? What is it about the demonic (Voldemort, vampires and reality TV) that attracts us? It must be some

deep-seated need we have to ritualize our separation from the evil in our world.

That would explain why we find exorcism in so many different cultures and religious traditions. For instance, exorcism was practiced in Sub-Saharan Africa long before Christianity arrived there. Wanting to know about that, I contacted Pastor Daniel GBundema, the leader of the African ministry at Campbell UMC. He's from Sierra Leone and he pastors a group of West Africans who ended up in the Bay Area after fleeing the civil wars that started in the 90's. I asked him to tell me about African exorcisms.

According to Daniel, African priests traditionally mixed purified water with herbs, incense and charms. They would then use the mixture as a rub or a drink and chant prayers over the person, invoking God and the spirits of their ancestors to cast out the demon. When the Christian missionaries arrived from

Europe and America, they tried to put a stop to all that. But indigenous African Churches are now reclaiming the practice.

The churches that were started by missionaries tend to reflect Western values and attitudes that don't always work so well in Africa. But the independent African churches preach an African Gospel that is shaped by the African context.

You can see the difference in how Africans read the Bible. Unlike us, they are right at home in the biblical world. For instance, when the Bible talks about poverty and slavery, it speaks to Africans in a much more immediate way than it speaks to us. Furthermore, when Jesus says that the last shall be first and the first shall be last, he gives hope to many Africans but a warning to many Americans. And when the Bible mentions evil spirits, Westerners tend to roll their eyes while Africans nod their heads.

Pastor Daniel explains that African tribal religion is all about spirits. Every created thing has one and every person has

direct access to God's Spirit. Because of this access to God, many Africans didn't really see the need for a Jesus. In fact, Pastor Daniel says, African Christians have an understanding of God that is quite comfortable with the Hebrew Bible. They like the Old Testament prophets because they are spirit-anointed figures with a hotline to God. Also, the prophets know the future and that fits with the African tradition of fortunetellers.

But even though African Indigenous Christianity is very Spirit-oriented, there is a role for Jesus. Independent churches love the healing stories in the Gospels. They still do lots of exorcisms in Africa, but they do them in the name of Jesus.

Pastor Daniel says that African women are especially concerned about demons. As women, they are often frustrated in their lives. They are poor. They don't have much education. And when things are bad at home, they don't have many good options. So they go to an Independent Church and sometimes pay a lot of money for an exorcism.

There are African Indigenous congregations here in the Bay Area and Daniel tells me that sometimes the women in his church will go there to get an exorcism to address a personal problem. As an African Methodist, he is trying to discourage that by teaching these women how to pray.

When you think about it, what the women really want—what we all want—is deliverance. We want liberation. We want transformation. And all of these things we can have if we just pray. We don't have to pay someone to cast out our demons. Instead, we can learn to cast our cares on God in the name of Jesus. That is what Western Christianity is teaching Africans.

And what are African Christians teaching us? Besides the fact that dancing and drumming is a wonderful way to worship God, I think Africans can teach us that we should pay more attention to the evil around us and what it is doing to us. We may laugh at the practice of exorcism, but every one of us is living in a culture that is possessed by forces that are

inhospitable to our values. There are powers that, for one thing, reward us for being greedy rather than for being godly. And to an extent that we don't even realize, we are totally dependent on a perpetual war economy. If we ever did achieve world peace, there would be global economic collapse. Now we may think that these are someone else's problems, someone else's demons, but we are fooling ourselves if we think that they don't have a demonic effect on every one of us. We all need deliverance.

Pastor Daniel's people will remind us that we have our individual struggles with evil, too. We are afflicted by the demons of prejudice: those forces that make people look at us and try to tell us who we are and what we are worth and how we must live and who we can love. Then add to that the demons that we invite in. Every one of us has been possessed by self-destructive thoughts and habits. We have all spent too much time being our own worst enemy. So, if there's a demon

inside us, it's probably a toxic version of our selves that we let live there.

African Christians are telling us that we need to pay attention to all of that, even though we would rather do almost anything else. But salvation doesn't mean much unless you know and can appreciate what you are being saved from. Jesus came to cast out our demons—if that's what you want to call the darkness that is in us—not to show us how bad we are but to show us how good we can be. Every time he cast out a demon, the kingdom of God came that much closer to us.

So beat the drum and join the dance. Praise God that the demons in our lives have no authority over us, except what we agree to give them. The only real power in our lives is Jesus Christ, and his goodness triumphs over evil. His love wins the world. Thanks be to God.