

Movies such as *The Exorcist* and *The Omen* were some of the scariest movies I saw when growing up. The fear of the demonic allowed imaginations to run wild and fed into our concerns about evil, the devil, and how real that is in our world today.

Where does evil come from? Is the Satan a real being and if so, how did he come to be? Are the devilish and evil spirits around us today that are like angels of darkness? Or is such talk simply the result of a more superstitious and less scientific world? Today's Gospel brings relevance to such questions.

Luke was a physician (a scientist) and used very specific words in this text. He said a man was filled with demons (powerful forces of darkness and evil) that had taken control of his life. He also described the man as being filled with an unclean spirit as opposed to his use of Holy Spirit when talking about how God's breath of life.

As we look at mass murders, cancer, genocide, compulsive stealing, the destruction of reputations and careers of others is there any other word other than evil to attach to such destruction? It is important to see evil as a real, physical, spiritual force that has the potential to separate us from God. It is also a force that can fill the emptiness of any life without faith in God.

Any evil is a life form, ill wind, and energy. It is the antithesis of God, opposed to God, and empty of love, goodness, or life. Whether we utilize the word *demon*, *devil*, *Satan*, or *evil spirit* we mean a dark force that is selfish, destructive, filled with death, seeks to be louder than God, and is everything God isn't.

Genesis teaches God created only good. So, what happened? Throughout scripture we see the words sin and death used to describe the dark brokenness opposed to God. In Genesis 2 and 3 it is described as the voice of the serpent, a slithery, poisonous, venomous voice. Paul describes this force as an evil lion seeking to devour.

We see similar dark forces at work in sexual abuse, terrorist bombings, drug addiction, slavery, parentless children, racial hatred, hateful speech, child pornography, disease and pestilence. How could any of these come from God?

Life encounters dangerous and deadly serious predators of all shapes and sizes. Whatever we call it, the devil is real and a personification of all that is evil – of everything God isn't; dark, selfish, empty, and full of death. Whatever the devil might be, it is like a black hole – seeking to pull everyone and everything into his control and like water, rushing to fill the emptiness in lives when God is pushed away.

Just as Jesus is God in the flesh, so He often encounters evil darkness in the flesh as well. In the beginning of Luke's Gospel Jesus was tempted by forty days by the devil. In another case the word for this evil apparition is Satan. In today's text, Jesus is confronted with a man full of multiple demons or evil spirits.

Jesus' entire ministry was a holy war against the power and forces of darkness and death, or in other words, the devil and all the evil that is. On the other hand, God's holy

breath creates, loves, promises faith, hope, peace, while any evil spirit is a bad breath or foul wind that tempts, deceives, and brings death! It is like the difference between fresh breath and bad breath, or the winds of a typhoon and the gentle breeze of spring evening. God's breath is different than that of evil.

Consider where the story begins! A young man is naked, rejected, left for dead and chained in the tombs! Now consider how Luke's Gospel ends with a Jesus beaten, rejected, and barricaded in a tomb behind a rock! What an incredible turnaround the Gospel announces! And the story concludes with a young man healed and restored, the first sight the disciples would have on Easter was of a young man, sitting by a tomb with a message of joy and hope. This is not what anyone would have expected!

Is there any difference between an exorcism and Easter except one of degree? To simply attribute this to mental illness or a superstitious world is to miss the theological importance of Luke's careful use of language. Jesus did cast out demons or evil spirits! There is more! (Isn't there always more?) The story doesn't end with his healing, as the people who chained this young man are the ones who are not yet free. They refuse to accept Jesus and turn away. He would not even get a hearing from them.

It is interesting that they were so used to evil they could live with it. What they really feared was having God in their midst! I wonder if that is not a parable for many today! Of all the people changed by Jesus' love (who followed and became his disciples) why do you think this one was not allowed to travel on with Jesus? Why was he sent home?

Remember, Jesus had to draft his closest disciples, while this one volunteered. But consider what a credible and powerful witness he could be! He was a man whose every breath had inhaled and exhaled only evil, whose life was demonic and whose breath was foul; until he miraculously was filled with the Spirit of Christ himself! This was his baptism. This was his new creation. He was restored, renewed, healed!

This exorcism in Luke is Christmas, Calvary, and Easter rolled into one; a proclamation of Jesus' mission. This man's call mirrors our baptismal response to baptismal grace that exists to drive the evil spirit out of our daily living.

Jesus changed his life! Now every breath he took had the potential to fill other lives with joy and hope. Breathe in, breathe out. Once the evil was no longer in his lungs, God's love was, and every breath was flavored by the sweet smell of Easter. The climax of this miracle becomes his witness! In many ways this was a more powerful miracle and surprise than the exorcism. Certainly, Jesus has power over evil! But consider how difficult it had to be for this man to become a disciple and a willing witness. He had been shunned, chained, controlled by darkness, and suddenly was set free!

This young man would become the one who could change his neighbors and family and friends as he carried God inside of himself to them! They had begged Jesus to leave them. But they would listen to someone they knew. Just as those villagers didn't want their lives to change, we must not become so comfortable with sin (or used to the evil around us) that we don't fall into that same trap. The ultimate in demonic possession is not dramatic scenes like this young man or a movie like the Exorcist, but when life is filled with or guided by subtle, less dramatic but similarly unclean spirits.

What enters in is what escapes. What we breathe is what we exhale. Breathe in! Breathe out! Will we inhale the foul pollution of evil or the fragrance of an empty tomb? This exorcism in Luke is Christmas, Calvary, and Easter rolled into one, a proclamation of Jesus' mission. This man's call mirrors our baptismal response to baptismal grace that exists to drive the evil spirit out of our daily living.

Because evil is real, God loved the world so much that he came to bring a fresh breath of life, overpower darkness, and lead us into the joy of new life. Darkness becomes light. Despair becomes hope. Selfishness becomes love. In response (as it was for this young man) our call is to go where we are known and have a credibility with family and friends.

This is not just a story of a young man long ago. It is our story as well, for we too have been set free from the power of darkness and death and gifted to live now in the glory of Easter and the joy of Bethlehem's star. Take a deep breath and taste and see that the Lord indeed is good! And remember words from 2 Peter 2:19 which say, "you will do well to pay attention to it, as to a light shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts. What better news can there be?"