

Sermon for the Fifth Sunday after Epiphany

'And he would not permit the demons to speak.'

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Have you never heard a demon speak? Most would say no. Most would say they never have conversed with a demon, or any other incorporeal spirit. Even most good Christians would say that when they pray, it is somewhat of a one-sided conversation, forgetting that when they hear the Word, Christ speaks back in return.

If someone were to say they heard demons, we would immediately believe them to be schizophrenic, or to have some other mental illness; after all, they are hearing voices! Something that happens only to the mad.

However, there is nothing contradictory about hearing voices, and hearing demons. Rarely do the voices of those who have been diagnosed with a disorder say anything particularly angelic. I have never known a story of a man who heard voices in his head that told him 'You really should visit your grandmother this weekend, she would appreciate that.' [Most] tend to be more along the lines of 'pick up that chainsaw' and so on.

Most who hear voices would claim they are 'tormented' by them, and tormenting mankind is something demons are singularly interested in. A sickness can be demonic, and a demon can be a sickness. For this reason, St. Mark, in his Gospel, draws no distinction between physical or mental ailment and the assault of demons, but rather simply writes *'and they brought to Jesus all who were sick or oppressed by demons'*, as if the two were interchangeable. And perhaps he is more than wise in doing so, for at the end of the day, they accomplish the same purpose: to cause anxiety, doubt, pain, self-obsession, torment, and ultimately death; and from the viewpoint of the demons, hopefully eternal death.

But again, let us leave the rarer cases of those who hear audible voices, and return to your case. Have you never heard a demon speak? I think you hear them speak far more often than you know. One may even say you hear them constantly. You may even hear them this moment.

Our minds are filled with voices. Our mind is but an arena where competing arguments play themselves out as we struggle to determine what to do in our lives, and most of those voices are not the voice of Christ, nor the voice of the Spirit of Baptism. They are the voices of sin, of the fear of death; that is to say, they are the voice of the devil, tempting us to every evil, sometimes those that are grand and scandalous, but far more often those that are small, petty, even unnoticeable: laziness, selfishness, self-pity, self-loathing, small moments of seeming righteous indignation, moments of arrogance, pride, annoyance, judging others in an unflattering light, which is a peculiar delight of man, for it not only tears down another, but by comparison lifts us up, making us feel righteous, justified. These thoughts we generally never give real voice to before others, but we coddle them inside ourselves, our secret darlings. These words of demons.

For you do not know that from the beginning, the devil has always offered another word? His own word? A competing word? A word against God's Word? A word incarnate not in the Son of the Father, but incarnate in flesh of sinners, and given reality in our *thoughts, words, and deeds, by what we have done, and by what we have left undone?* By hearing another voice, Eve became the progenitor of sin, and Adam the father of fallen humanity. By hearing another voice, all their children fall daily, sin daily, bring damnation on themselves daily. For we hearken unto lies, from the Father of Lies.

Indeed, if we were honest with ourselves, we would have to admit that the Word of God inside our hearts is drowned out by an endless cacophony of demonic screeching. And so we see that in our heart is not only Christ and His Word, but an anti-Word, which is to say, the Antichrist. We begin every Liturgy with Confession, and for good reason, for we indeed deserve *temporal and eternal punishment*.

'Now while it was still dark, Jesus departed and went out to a desolate place, and there he prayed. And Simon and those who were with him searched for him and said to him, "Everyone is looking for you."

For indeed, who does not seek Him who *speaks with authority*, and *silences the proud*? Who makes the voices cease?

Who is this, then, who shall *break the teeth* of the ungodly spirits? *Have you not known, have you not heard? It is he who sits above the circle of the earth, and its inhabitants are like grasshoppers beneath him; who stretches out the heavens like a curtain and spreads them like a tent to dwell in; who makes the rulers of the earth as emptiness; who brings princes to nothing, even 'the prince of the power of this world.'*

It is *The Lord, who is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth who does not faint nor grows weary; whose understanding is unsearchable. Who departed and went out to a desolate place, and there he prayed.*

And after His disciples had found Him, He said *'Let us go on to the next towns, that I may preach there also, for that is why I have come.'*

Indeed, the Lord has come to preach, even in the next town, and every town, to every soul, that His Word might silence the voices of the demons; that His strong Word might slay the Antichrist in the broken heart of every man, for *he did not permit the demons to speak.*

Therefore we rejoice, and pray that the Holy Word go out unto all the world. We who are baptized, of His royal priesthood and regal dominion, His eternal Church, we pray that the Word like a refiner's fire should cleanse this creation of the voice of the great deceiver, knowing that:

'The king shall rejoice in God, and everyone that sweareth by him shall glory. But the mouth of them that speak lies shall be stopped.'

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Preached by Pastor Fields

Sermon Texts: Isaiah 40:21-31; 1 Corinthians 9:16-27; Mark 1:29-39.