

Sermon for the Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany

'But he would not let the demons speak because they knew who he was.'

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It is said that a certain German monk was often taunted by demons. They would recite to him his many sins, all the evils he had ever done, for they were following the example of their father, the devil, who is the Accuser, and the Father of Lies.

The monk would not listen to them; nor would he tolerate their mockery. Rather, he threw a well full of ink across his cell against the wall to cast the demons away. He would not let them speak.

Similarly, an ancient saint from Asia Minor, that is, modern day Turkey, who was often attacked by the voices of wandering demons, would recite against these treacherous spirits verses from the Bible, in imitation of our Lord, who responded to the temptations of Satan with the words of Scripture. This same man would write a book entitled simply *Talking Back*. For he would have us know how to mock the devil, as the devil would mock us.

This the saint did in imitation of St. Anthony of the desert, who hid himself in an abandoned Roman fort for twenty years. There he fought with unclean spirits day in and day out, spirits that revealed to him hour upon hour every misguided wrong he had ever committed. Yet St. Anthony did not hear their accusations, but only the prayer of his Lord, who taught him to ask only that *he would be forgiven his trespasses, as he forgives those who trespass against him, and that he would be delivered from the evil one.*

This he prayed, for he wished to conform himself to the image of Our Lord, who wandered in the wilderness for forty days, who struck at scoffing of Lucifer with the divine revelation of Holy Scripture.

We, in our modern time, cringe at the mention of the demonic. We believe we are

too civilized to believe in defiled spirits that attack our souls; or if we do believe in such things, we believe it as a theory, as something far away, that may affect some people, but certainly not us, at least not regularly.

To think of demonic oppression, such belongs to the dark ages, or so we think, for we think thus of all obvious truths.

There is nothing more obvious than the devil, and all of his works, and all of his ways. For nothing about human nature, as it is, can be explained apart from the influence of Satan.

For sin, which we all must admit we are enslaved to, is not merely a giving in to the flesh, nor a surrender to desire, nor an immoderate seeking after pleasure. These even animals suffer, but we are not like unto the animals. Our evil is greater than this.

For our wickedness is not simply hedonism, but desecration. All our sin is a mockery of what was meant to be good in human nature.

When we commit adultery, it is not because we merely love a new person, but because we sneer at the vows we made to the old.

When we commit murder, it is not because we merely desire justice against someone who wronged us, but because we long for destruction against one made in the likeness of God.

When we commit blasphemy, it is not because we believe there is no God, but because we believe God to be unworthy of belief.

Indeed, *we are children of our Father, the devil, the Father of Lies.*

Look into your own heart, and you will find that there is nothing more real than the demons. It is no mere ancient superstition. It is the most intimate truth of our daily existence, that we long to violate the image of God in others, because we cannot tolerate the broken image of God in ourselves.

The devil and all his angels speak, and we listen. This is the nature of our fallenness: that we listen, even as our mother Eve listened, even listened to the voice of the serpent.

You know well this voice, that haunts your mind and speaks cruelty to your soul. That justifies every grudge you hold against your friends, that validates every suspicion you harbor against your spouse, that defends all malice you hold against your parents, your children, your neighbor, and the stranger. It is the voice that whispers hatred against those whom you should love, and speaks sweet nothings about your own self, who in self-loathing, you yet love above all others.

It is the hushed tone of him who utters, *there is no God*. And who demands we admit that *there is no image of God in others*. For this is the final purpose of the devil: that we confess his atheism, not only against God, but against our neighbor.

Our Lord does not tolerate this sacrilege. This day He goes, as the Gospel tells us, from village to village, to cast out demons, and to *stop the mouths of them that speak lies*. He goes, even now, to *break the teeth of the ungodly*. For He cannot permit His image in man to be defiled.

And in casting out these demons, He first commands them not to speak, to shut up. That their words may no longer haunt our hearts, nor plague our minds, but rather that we might 'talk back,' and hear only the words of Christ, and not those of our adversary.

In casting out the demons, the Lord liberates our minds of the false gospel of hatred towards ourselves and toward our neighbors, and binds our hearts to the true Gospel of God's mercy upon us, and His love toward our neighbor, that we might live as men made free.

What then shall we say, as we renounce the devil, and all of his works, and all of his ways?

Perhaps it is enough to forget the wickedness of our past, and to look only at the good that is our Christ.

What then shall we say?

'Rejoice evermore, and again, I say, rejoice.'

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Preached by Pastor Fields

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