

Pentecost IV (Proper 7, RCL Year C)
June 20, 2010 (Fathers' Day)

St. Margaret's
Annapolis

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer.

Amen.

I received an email from a good friend this week. It was addressed to several Episcopal priests, most of whom I recognized by name, and it began,

Episcopal Clergy:

I am apparently in need of assistance to remove a jinx. I am not sure of the proper service within the prayer book, so I [am soliciting] ideas from you.

He went on to describe being the victim of a serious automobile accident – the second in nine months – in which his car was totaled. This being an event, (quote) “heretofore unknown in my lifetime” (close quote), and he went on to speculate that it might just be mathematical odds, but that he suspected a jinx.

Among the responses he got from my colleagues in ministry, this was my favorite:

- 1. The fact that you're not dead suggests that instead of a jinx, you might have an angel hanging around you.*
- 2. If it is a jinx, I might suspect demonic attachment. I took (and this is a quote) a ridiculous class in seminary on “deliverance ministry,” and we discussed at length the difference between demonic attachment and demonic possession. This sounds like a classic case of the former.*

Then he went on to describe the professor's questionable credentials and concluded, (and I'm cleaning this up a bit) “...so it's probably more likely that anything he said was a load of [hooley].”

Please understand... my friend is an educated man, a great doctor, in fact. And we'll presume for the sake of argument that the clergy on his list are educated and reasonable people. And yet, tongue-in-cheek or not, we're using the language of demonology to discuss his accident. In the 21st century, no less.

Even in this age of science and reason, there has been a resurgence of interest in angels and demons in the last few decades. Some of this goes along with rise of certain brands of fundamentalism; but some of it may simply be the result of our persistent, basic questions about good and evil and our need to have ways to talk about those things.

The word "demon" comes from the Greek, *daemon*, meaning a spirit, either good or bad. In some explanations from Jewish tradition, demons were rebellious angels. In any case, demons took on the connotation of evil, and are sometimes referred to as Satan's minions, doing his bidding.

In first century Palestine of Jesus' day, demons and angels were a fairly common part of the human experience. So here we have a story in the gospel of Luke about Jesus' encounter with a man so full of demons that when Jesus asks, "What is your name?" the reply is "Legion."

Then we have this rather bizarre exchange in which the demons ask to be allowed to enter a herd of pigs instead of being sent back "into the abyss." It is very important to note here that these demons obey Jesus; they always do.

But our rational modern selves squirm as we try to take in the spectacle of a herd of pigs throwing themselves off a cliff. We either squirm or, more likely, just dismiss the whole thing as so much pre-scientific primitivism.

Nevertheless, like my friend and his suspicion of a jinx – which is just another name for an evil spirit who is messing with us – we find ourselves using the language of demons and angels more often than we realize.

Before I go further, let me stake my claim with C.S. Lewis, who when asked if he believed there was such a thing as Satan, answered (and I paraphrase) that Satan would have us believe one of two things: either that he is more powerful than he really is, or that he doesn't exist. We could apply the same principle to demons.

So let us not fall into the temptation of thinking there is a demon behind every bush, nor that there is no such thing. At the very least, when we speak of demons, most of us are describing an experience of... some unexplained thing that threatens us... or that seems to take away our control and leave us at the mercy of powers outside ourselves.

Some of us speak of personal demons; demons of addiction, demons of illness, demons of fear. That last one resonates with me. When Bill and I

fell in love and married, which was clearly somewhat later in life – my one demon has been the fear of losing him (or him losing me). So I can tell you from personal experience that demons do threaten us; they threaten to rob us of life's abundance and joy.

There are also evils of collective proportions that threaten to rob us of the very goodness of our humanity. They are the demons of power, greed, envy, and fear. *They are legion*. They threaten our trust in God and in each other. They threaten our willingness and ability to establish and strengthen social structures that would, as our baptismal covenant says, protect the dignity of every human being.

They make us afraid of people who are different from us. They even promote greed on a scale that results in the collapse of Wall Street and, yes, the Gulf oil spill.

Closer to home, there is a manifestation of this sort in our own Anglican Communion. For most of you, this has nothing to do with your daily lives, has no affect on this beloved parish of ours, and so goes largely unnoticed.

But for those of us whose lives are intertwined with the institutional church, particularly the ordained, we've been on a daily diet lately of international news concerning The Episcopal Church and the Anglican Communion.

It has its roots in our origins and in the history of colonialism – in other words, it is not new and it is complex. While the current conflict would appear to be about tradition and the authority of scripture, trust me: it is about power and money – demons if ever there were any!

And at this particular moment in time, all this has a very specific connection to St. Margaret's Church in Annapolis, Maryland – because the current bone of contention is over the election and consecration of Mary Glasspool as bishop suffragan of Los Angeles. For those of you who are new to St. Margaret's, Mary was the rector of this parish from 1992 to 2001, and then Canon to the Bishops from 2001 until her election last December.

Although this was all done transparently and in accordance with our constitution and canons, the result has been a series of charges and countercharges, sanctions, and threats of schism. [All of this can be followed in any number of resources; probably the easiest being a free email subscription to Episcopal News Service. It's easy to find online, but we'll include a link to it when this sermon is posted on our website.]

<http://www.episcopal-life.org/>

The latest zinger was last Sunday. Our Presiding Bishop, The Most Reverend Katharine Jefferts Schori, had been invited by the dean of Southwark Cathedral, London, to preach and celebrate the Eucharist.

In addition to the background noise of the conflict over +Mary Glasspool's consecration, it must be pointed out that the Church of England is in a rather huge and heated debate over whether or not to have women bishops. (Yes, the mother church is a bit behind.)

So it turns out that the Archbishop told our Presiding Bishop (his ecclesiastical equivalent, you understand) that she was not to wear her mitre at this service. (That's the pointy hat that bishops wear, and although it's sometimes the butt of jokes, it is in all seriousness the symbol of a bishop's authority.)

Classy woman that she is, Bishop Jefferts Schori *carried* her mitre! Just picture it!

But the really redemptive part of this story – and there is always redemption, even if we have to wait for it – was in the Presiding Bishop's sermon. Here she was, in the midst of an ecclesiastical firestorm, and she offered grace.

If you remember, last week's gospel was about the woman who crashed a dinner party that Jesus was attending in the home of a well-to-do Pharisee. She was considered a "woman of the street," and she scandalized the gathering by washing Jesus' feet with her tears, drying them with her hair, and anointing his feet with costly oil.

In her sermon, the Presiding Bishop asked, "What makes us so afraid of the other? ... Can we see the human heart yearning for love in that person over there? Can we recall our own yearning, and find the connection?"

And she ended by saying that even those fearful dinner guests might eventually be drawn by love to the heavenly banquet table. "There's room for us all at this table," she said, "there are tears of welcome and a kiss for the wanderer, and the sweet smell of home."

"Want to join the feast?" she asked. "You are welcome here. Love has saved you – go in peace. Lean over and say the same to three strangers: you are welcome here. Love has saved you – be at peace."

So I say, yes, we live in a world populated by something like demons. We live in a world in which it sometimes looks like evil will win. But remember: the demons obeyed Jesus. And they will obey us in his name.

All we have to do is love. Whether the demons we battle are personal, or be they legion, love always wins. All we have to do is lean over and say to each other: Love has saved you. You are welcome here. We all have a place at the table.

Amen.

lml+

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