

## **Under Every Bush**

Doing a ministry exchange can be of great benefit to a minister and to two congregations.....the one to which they exchange and the one to which they will return. Nothing changed my life so dramatically in such a positive manner as the very first exchange I did to New Zealand in 1991. I returned to Nova Scotia a much better minister than when I left and I hope I have continued to build on that new platform ever since.

My congregation in Nova Scotia loved what my exchange partner brought to them by way of ministry and I am confident that his congregation in New Zealand did as well.

But one of the things that concerned me about that time in New Zealand was this. They were very big on Satan. The work of the devil popped up in conversation frequently among some of the members of that congregation. If the hot water heater in their house broke, it was the handiwork of the devil. If their car got a flat tire, if someone got hurt, if an animal on their farm went missing, if it rained on a day when

they had planned an outdoor event....everything that ever went wrong was the work of the devil. It seems that a devil was hiding under every bush.

I did not grow up in a church or a home that spent much time talking about the devil. I spent 3 years in seminary and considerable time in various mentor churches and did not hear much of anything about the devil there.

Yet it is undeniable that in the Old and New Testament, a force of evil...Satan, Lucifer, the devil get considerable coverage. Just after his baptism, Jesus is lead off into the wilderness by the Spirit where he was tempted by the devil. Today we read about the very first recorded example of Jesus meeting someone possessed by a demon. So reference to evil, the devil, Satan is no stranger to Scripture.

William Barclay writes, "If Jesus' **words** had amazed the people in the synagogue, his **deeds** left them thunderstruck. In the synagogue there

was a man in the grip of an unclean spirit. He created a disturbance and Jesus healed him.”

The Jews and indeed the whole ancient world, believed strongly in demons and devils. Every phase and form of life was ruled by them. They sat on thrones, they hovered around cradles. The earth was literally hell. There was an intensity with which the ancient world believed in demons.

There was a surgical procedure known as trepanning. It was primitive to say the least and medical and surgical procedure was exceedingly basic and raw. A small hole is drilled in the top of the human skull and that disc removed, leaving a very small open hole in the skull. That disc was often put on a cord and worn around a person's neck as ornamentation. It was believed that from that hole, the demon that was believed to possess the person could then escape. And yes, this drilling into the skull was done while the person was alive.

There is no consensus as to where demons come from but their role was to run interference between God and human and to cause us harm. According to the Jewish belief, demons could eat and drink and beget children. They were terrifying and numerous. Everyone had 10,000 on their right hand and 10,000 on their left. They lived in unclean places such as tombs and places where there was no cleansing water. They lived in the desert where their howling could be heard. They were especially dangerous to the lonely traveller, to the woman in child birth, to the bride and bride groom, to children who were out after dark, and to those who voyaged at night. There was a demon of blindness, one of deafness, one of leprosy one of heat-disease. Female demons were the enemies of children. That is why children had their guardian angels that we hear about in Matthew.

At one point in and around A.D. 30 the Christian church established an Order of Exorcists who claimed to cast out demons. Jews and pagan exorcists used elaborate incantations and spells and magical rites.

They were confused when Jesus simply said to the man in the synagogue with the unclean spirit, “Be silent and come out of him”.

For us in North America, 2018, this notion of demon possession is still a difficult problem and one upon which complete light might never shine.

We know so much more now than in Jesus time. Science has brought us far. But we still live, in some sense, in a demon haunted world. So many men, women and children live with tremendous fear and anxiety, insecurity, lack of self- esteem. Mental illness manifests in so many different forms.

In his day, Jesus brought the power of faith and God and freed people from domination of evil spirits. Jesus can still restore the soul and renew a right spirit within us today, bringing the power of God to bear on the minds of those of us who are burdened, distressed and ill.

When a person’s faith is awakened to the power of God, liberation from the past comes from the forgiveness of sin, the living of a life away from the merry go round of preoccupation with self, into a

liberating concern for others. By the limitless power of love, we become freed and we become able to let go of envy and jealousy and hatred,

Those gathered in the synagogue that day recognized that Jesus taught with authority...very different from how the scribes taught. It was the man with the unclean spirit who challenged Jesus. "What have you got to do with us? Have you come to destroy us?" It is the language of unrestrained individualism....those who feel threatened by Jesus....those who insist on living their own life their own way ...even if that includes greed, ostracism of others, oppressing others, a life of hedonism with no care or concern for one's fellow man.

Jesus is concerned with everything that affects you and me. Nothing human, beautiful or evil, is unknown to him. Jesus is concerned with every burden that rests heavily on human shoulders and cuts cruelly into them. Jesus is concerned about the wellbeing of all of God's children.

That day in the synagogue, the self-righteous holy ones who saw what Jesus had done, and how it had never been done that way before were confused. Perhaps they wanted Jesus to mind his own business. Life was just fine as it was. To which Jesus said clearly by his actions, “People are my business. My love knows no bounds.”

In the end, people generally align with one of 3 positions on this topic:

#1. The matter of demon possession should be relegated to the sphere of primitive thought. It was a simplistic, albeit terrifying way of explaining things in life and science that we had not yet discovered.

#2. Demon possession was true in New Testament times and continues to be true today.

#3. There are some questions to which we do not have satisfactory answers.

I don't know where you are on this topic. But for me the more important lesson from this passage is this.

If we are to take our call as disciples of Jesus seriously, like Jesus we should make people our business. We should strive to love one another with a love that knows no bounds. When we see oppression, or sickness, or fear, or loneliness or ostracism, or injustice of any kind, we should take action. We should not be silent. We should take a stand. It is perfect love that casts out fear. May it be that love which we live our lives by.

Amen