



EPIPHANY 4 B
29 January AD 2012

Mark 1:15-20

Through the miracle of modern technology things can be made to look very real that are not. When we were kids and Godzilla attacked Tokyo, we all knew very well that it was a model of the city that some puppet was destroying. And when Flash Gordon's space ship rocketed through outer space you had to *willingly suspend your disbelief* or it just didn't work. We did the same for The Planet of the Apes. But that upside down ocean liner looked so real in the 1972 film, Poseidon Adventure.

With each new Star Wars installment they got better at taking us to a world a long time ago, in a galaxy far far away. Today's computer generated special effects have changed the way we see things considerably. Scientific and technical progress has made us skeptics of us all, not only with regard to the paranormal, but of God himself. But God wants us to trust in him—he asks us to trust in him from one end of the Bible to the other. The devil, on the other hand, he is happy leaving us in blissful ignorance, doubt and disbelief.

**“There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio,
than are dreamt of in your philosophy.” (Hamlet I:v)**

Before we go any farther, I can't say that I believe in ghosts. However, I do not disbelieve in the spirit world. The Creed I confess suggests that God is the creator of all that *seen and unseen* (visible and invisible). With the prince of Denmark, I can't pretend to know or understand everything—science does not have all the answers. And we willingly fork out hard-earned dollars to see films based on the premise that there is a darlworld over which we have no power. Hollywood counts on the fact we want to believe in demons and the paranormal, and that we enjoy being scared out of our wits.

The demon possessed individual in this morning's reading, whether he was mentally ill or actually possessed by demon—his life was, was worthless. Either way the devil owned him, the man was in bondage—his life was a living hell. Today Jesus enters the fray on his behalf. The cross is still beyond the horizon line. But Jesus becomes a hero, he becomes this man's redeemer. Jesus rescued him, our Lord set him free.

You and I must wonder at this: that we find the demonic in a religious setting. The room is filled with people of faith; Jesus the Son of God is standing in their midst and the enemy is there too! Our “old evil foe” is brash, bold and foolish. Satan will not hesitate to tempt our Lord in the wilderness (a reading several Sundays away). What really interests us is that the first person to identify Jesus in this gospel is a demon-possessed man.

Do any of the presidential candidate hopefuls want publicity from a known and convicted felon? But who needs publicity like that? We are ambassadors for our Lord, heralds of his good news. Our behavior and our words, speak volumes about us—and reflect on the Word we bring—words of eternal life in Jesus’ name.

The Bible gives us advice about protecting our spiritual and mental health.

- “*Submit yourself to God... resist the devil and he will flee from you... Come near to God and he will come near to you.*” (James 4)
- In 1 Peter (5:9) we read that our enemy *prowls about like a hungry lion seeking souls to devour*. We are to resist—make an effort.

People get into trouble when they open the door to the devil.

- Every gambler who can’t quit took that first chance, placed that first bet.
- At some point a drug addicted person let his guard down and took his first pill, or smoked his first joint.
- A man who abuses his spouse was introduced to that behavior and it was never corrected: with the passing of time it became a way of life; the abused eventually became an abuser.
- A person possessed was either introduced to the satanic by someone, or themselves opened the door to the enemy.
 - Even Eve opened the door just a crack, she studied that fruit forbidden to her. It was pleasing to look at. She reasoned, something that looked so good must taste delicious. And, why would something so beautiful be off limits? Besides, *it will make me like God*—that’s what *the tempter* said.

It’s not just about the paranormal

Imagine the grief David might have avoided if instead of indulging his lusts by staring at a bathing woman, he had just turned his head. What if Bernard Madoff had the wisdom to know that handling other people’s money was too much of a temptation for him, and instead became a restaurateur? For the same reason I wouldn’t recommend an alcoholic run a liquor store.

It has been pointed out that “not believing in demons has hardly eradicated evil in this world.” You can be mentally ill, you can give your body and soul to Satan, or you can join a gang, you can push drugs or abuse alcohol or gamble away your life savings. Evil comes in all different colors and sizes and shapes. For some money is a great temptation, for others it’s chocolate. But theft is theft, and to covet is as much a sin to God as any other. There is one way that leads to life, that road leads to the cross and Jesus Christ—our hero, crucified and raised for us—for you.

There a lots of things we will never fully understand. Sometimes we are simply victims of evil. But life leaves us all broken and in bondage. No one is exempt. St. Paul says that *all have sinned and fallen short of God’s* expectations (Romans 3:23-24). We are saved, rescued and set free by Jesus Christ as God’s gift; that is we are *justified*.

In the midst of human frailty and sin Jesus “manifests” the glory of God. That’s what Epiphany is all about. That’s our task as God’s people. Making Jesus known in the midst of life, however sloppy it might be.

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