

Texts: Job 4:1-4, 6-7; Mark 1:29-39
5th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year B
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The Christian monks of old had a special name for a particular spiritual sickness – they called it the ‘noonday demon’. The ‘noonday demon’ was – and still is – the sickness of an *unhappy restlessness*: an agitated, anxious and feverish sadness that accomplishes nothing and leaves us exhausted, as we long for something to give us peace, but we know not what. One of the symptoms of the sickness of the ‘noonday demon’ the monks pointed out was how a monk afflicted with this spiritual sickness would keep going to the door of his hut and look out, wondering why no one was coming to visit him. The modern day equivalent would be constantly checking our cell phone to see if we’ve gotten any text messages or tweets or emails – or, if you’re old like me, constantly checking to see if anyone commented on your Facebook post.

The unhappy restlessness that accomplishes nothing, the ‘noonday demon’, is very much a part of the spiritual sickness of our day. And Job summed up so much of the unhappiness of current life in his sad words we read this morning. Job wrote,

Is not man's life on earth a drudgery?
Troubled nights have been allotted to me.
If in bed I say, ‘When shall I arise?’
Then the night drags on;
I am filled with restlessness until the dawn.
My days are swifter than a weaver's shuttle;
they come to an end without hope.
Remember that my life is like the wind;
I shall not see happiness again.

How many of you sometimes have felt like Job does? I have. How many of you sometimes wake up in the night, filled with restlessness and even worry and anxiousness? I do. The ancient monks called this spiritual restlessness the ‘noonday demon’, but it strikes even more powerfully at night. Why is it our Gospel story specifically says it’s *in the evening*, after sunset, that the townspeople bring to Jesus those who are ill or possessed by demons? Because it’s in the night, in the darkness, that the demonic powers of darkness seem even *more* powerful to us. That’s why, at the Service of Night Prayer that monks pray in their monasteries and many Christians pray in their homes just

before going to bed, we read St Peter warning us, “Be vigilant. Your opponent the devil is prowling around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour” (1 Peter 5:8) and we pray “Lord, we beg you to visit this house and banish from it all the deadly power of the enemy.” Jesus connects the sicknesses and illness that afflict us to the power of demons and demonic attacks. Our physical illnesses are part of the brokenness of God’s good creation that came upon the world with the coming of sin. Our psychic and emotional and spiritual illnesses are tied up in the attacks upon us by demons and other evil spirits that constantly are seeking to corrupt, drag down and destroy God’s creation – us! This is how Jesus, the Son of God, analyses our human situation and sets out to heal us. The monks of old called that spiritual sickness of unhappy restlessness the *noonday demon* for good reason – it is part of the affliction coming from the evil forces beyond us that would like to see God’s creation fail. And how about that despair that fills Job’s ending words? Job compares the days of his life as flying by in unhappiness like the shuttle the weaver shoves quickly back and forth on her loom, until suddenly it stops – like the days of his life come to an end *without hope*. ‘I shall not see happiness again,’ Job says. That utter despair and hopelessness in life are as real today for so many people as in Job’s day. Jesus links our sicknesses and despair and hopelessness to the demonic powers of darkness, as the entire Bible does, and Jesus promises in this Gospel story that this is why he has come into the world – to preach God’s power and to drive out demons. If the Christian faith is true, then we have to believe that Jesus is still among us driving back the demonic powers of darkness to create space for life as he did when he first appeared upon the earth.

That’s when it is hard to believe, because so many prayers for healing – for psychic, emotional, and spiritual healing – seem to go unanswered by Jesus. When we pray, are we just speaking words into the darkness, with no one actually listening? It’s tempting to think that sometimes, when the demons seem to be winning. My personal experience is that healing does come from Jesus, but it is slow in coming, at least as we experience it, and often *imperfect* in this world, as afflicted as it is. But we definitely are not alone – Job’s words are sad words, but they are not the final word on our existence. Even when Jesus walked the earth, what God was doing through Jesus was often concealed, secret, seen only imperfectly. In St Mark’s story of Jesus, throughout the earthly life of Jesus it is only the demons who recognize who Jesus is, that Jesus is the Son of God – and Jesus

never permits the demons to speak and reveal his true identity. Only at the moment of Jesus' death on the cross does a human being – a pagan officer in the Roman army at that – recognize who Jesus is and says, 'Truly this man was God's Son.' Even on the day of Jesus being raised from the dead, in St Mark's story the witnesses don't tell anyone what has happened because they are afraid. Only gradually does the truth come out and spread. That is the hiddenness of the power of Jesus in this world, as his power slowly spreads and often is only partly seen – and that is how many of us experience Jesus' power in our lives, as slow, as hidden and just partially seen, or heard as only an occasional word spoken to us in the darkness of our lives where demons lurk and assault us. The Risen Jesus steadfastly is here with us, slowly healing our sicknesses and driving out the demons in his time, in his way, pushing back the darkness of despair and hopelessness, to make room for life in us.