

“*Get behind me . . . SATAN!*” Is it just *me*, or is Jesus just *rude*?

Language like that does command attention; but what does it really accomplish?

Case in point: we have been awash this week in demonizing discourse,
spewing forth from politicians and pundits.

It has made for a fascinating media circus.

But how far has it gotten us in dealing with forces that threaten to push the economy out of control?

Does collective anxiety contribute to this demonizing, I wonder?

Does the demonizing exacerbate our anxiety?

Whatever role fear may play in current political discourse,

it is *not* a factor for Jesus in his bristling stand off with Peter.

Jesus *isn't* anxious at all—as Mark sees it, Jesus is in his element.

If Jesus is rude to Peter, his *modus operandi* is intentional and habitual.

Last week, you remember, fresh from his baptism, Jesus was catapulted into the wilderness—
and tempted by Satan.

Between *that* encounter in the desert, and *this* encounter in the metro area of Cesarea Philippi,

Jesus, in Mark's Gospel, has dealt with demons ten times over.

Wherever they are, he takes them on—in the temple, outside a private home, in front of a cave, beside the sea.

Jesus casts out demons from men and women, adults and children, from fellow countrymen and foreigners.

In Mark's Gospel, Jesus is an Equal Opportunity Exorcist--and he doesn't operate alone.

He enlists his chosen disciples as agents in Operation Exorcism--all twelve of them.

More often than not, the demons don't go quietly.

They kick and scream and rant and rave—and Jesus shuts them up as he shuts them down.

All this to say that, for Mark, the demonic is not a topic you can politely ignore.

Cut the demon scenes from the text of Mark's Gospel, and its pages come out looking like slices of Swiss cheese.

The exorcising Jesus undertakes is not directed against the occasional antisocial outbursts

Of a luckless individual here or there.

No, when he says: “*Be Silent! Come out!*”

Jesus is hurling down the gauntlet against forces pervasive and perfidious—

social, political, and religious forces— titanic forces that hold these poor folks captive.

Make no mistake—when Jesus tells Peter “*Get behind me, SATAN,*” he means business.

But what kind of business, exactly? What are these demons—really?

Is “demons” a name for what we now call “mental illness”?

Does Mark believe in the occult, the paranormal?

Is “demon” just a smoke bomb sound byte like the one we've heard this week?

Is this demon fixation Mark's fanciful mythological imagination run amok—

spooking itself into beliefs about nasty super-beings with cosmic clout?

If I read Mark right, he'd have no patience at all with any such attempts to explain “what he really means”.

Mark, I think, is a pragmatist: what are demons, really?

A demon is whatever makes a destructive difference, whatever shreds the fabric of healthy community.

Demons are that which distract, disrupt, divide.

Diabolical—diabole—literally, “throwing apart, tearing asunder.”

Demons are what separate me from myself—me from you—us from each other—

all of *us* from all of *them*—the whole of humanity from our wholeness in God.

In the current demonizing discourse, fill in the blanks—

bankers against mortgage losers, against 401k holders, against economists,

against social engineers, against the rich, against the middle class, against the poor.

Tag them as you like, demons are the indisputably real forces that separate us
and set us at war with who we have been, with who we are, with who we could be—if only.

But Peter—poor old Peter isn't doing any such diabolical thing!

He isn't cutting himself off from Jesus; he's trying to stay connected, for goodness sake!

He's undertaking an intervention on behalf of his beloved master.

Jesus has just asked his disciples to identify him.

And Peter has gotten the answer right—he names Jesus as the Messiah.

Then Jesus, suddenly and without warning,

hard upon a gusher of dramatic good deeds—a well orchestrated full scale rescue operation
of bailing out human misery, and taking over troubled social assets.

After a brilliant opening burst of audacious hope,

Jesus comes screeching to a halt, and shifts into reverse.

He starts talking, not about fixing and rebuilding, restoring and improving
but about suffering and rejection, about dying and rising.

So Peter takes Jesus quietly aside—to cool him off, settle him down—

to talk some gentle sense into a Jesus who's clearly getting lost in crazy talk.

And what does Peter get for his trouble?

Jesus turns on him and dresses him down—right out there in public—

not just in front of his colleagues, but before crowds of anonymous bystanders.

Has Jesus had no management skills?

Maybe becoming an exorcist makes you rude!

Maybe Jesus has been dealing with demons so long

he can't keep from demonizing his closest of friends—It happens.

So one more time--if Jesus really means business with his "*get behind me Satan*" language,

What kind of business is that?

Here's one possible answer:

Surface impressions notwithstanding--Jesus deals with Peter's demons,

not by squelching Peter with a public shaming,

not by exacting from him and his colleagues an outrageously demanding sacrifice.

No, Jesus takes what is, for Peter, a destructive distraction,

and draws it into the very heart of God's own dream.

"Whatever does that mean?" Well, to understand, you have to hear the backstory.

"*I've got this dream,*" God says one fine day to an unsuspecting fellow named Abram.

"*Come with me,*" says God, "*and together we will make this dream come true.*"

An odd invitation, this, since Abram's life is pretty idyllic already.

A dream in the hand is worth more, surely,

than a dream at the end of an unknown road.

Why should Abram leave a sure thing for a risky who knows what?

But, wonder of wonders, Abram just up and goes—goes along with a God he barely knows.

What courage—What faith!—Well, YES and NO.

YES, because, along the journey, there are times when Abram *is* a real *mensch*.

He gives his nephew first choice of territory when their servants start squabbling.

Then he comes to the rescue when his nephew is overrun by an army that also wants that land.

Now and again, Abram turns aside, builds an altar and worships God—(This is good!)

So, yes, this *is* a faithful journey—Abram and God, living into the dream.

But NO it's not—because along the way, again and again,
Abram gets seriously, dangerous, disastrously distracted from following the dream.
Twice, Abram ventures into the territory of rulers accustomed to getting what they want.
Abram's wife is beautiful—(This is good!)—No it's not!

"The king will take her and then kill you!" Abram's demon whispers.

"Say she's your sister—the king gets her, you keep your head—this is a no brainer."

And, not once, but twice, as the ancient story goes, Abram caves, demonized by his fear.
Abram tries to save his own skin—and everybody pays.

His faith journey takes several other disastrous turns,
BUT every time Abram gets destructively, diabolically distracted,
God deals with those demons by getting in Abram's face,
not punishing him or putting him down,
but drawing him deeper and deeper into the dream—
though Abram's record suggests he should be trusted less and less.

"In you shall all the nations of the earth be blessed," says God.

Don't get distracted, Abraham. I keep connecting with you,

so that, together, we can make connection with every last one of those nations."

Yes—"Abraham"—I've changed your name; and your wife's to "Sarah."

No longer will you be named "exalted patriarch".

You and Sarah will henceforth be known as "nurturing parents of all generations."

Whenever Abraham's demons shred the dream, God stitches it back, and spreads it wider.

"Peter, we need not to cling to life," says Jesus to his understandably distracted disciple.

"The life we try to cling to will slip through our fingers, no matter what we do.

Messiah, Pete, is not a name that signals entitlement—an exalted position of political clout.

As God's anointed one, I am God's Dream Keeper, charged and tasked

with living into a vision of many nations as healthy family—

though the cost of that will be the death of me.

*That's what I've been about in my dramatic healing action,
and that's what I'll be about as I undertake my Passion.*

So, Peter, I'll be asking you again—but I'm asking you now.

Are you with me in this dream, or will you persist in being a distraction?

Well—that's my view about how Jesus deals with Peter's demon. See what you think.

But if I were you, I wouldn't quite buy it—at least not yet.

This may all be very well, but . . . well, Jesus was rude! So what's with that?

Mark gives us some help with this question, I think—

And so does Richard Cohen, op ed writer in the Washington Post.

Cohen gets to go first—

His Tuesday column, "History Roars Back," contains these three telling sentences:

We actually thought that we could have a house we could not afford

and a mortgage that we could not pay and that it would all somehow work out.

This keeps being called the American dream. It was actually the American delusion.

For our purposes, his point is this:

It's lovely to talk about *"God dealing with our demons by drawing us into a dream."*

But it isn't as simple as that, is it? Dreams can be delusional, destructive, demonic too.

Op ed writer Cohen's point is well taken—and Gospel writer Mark is well aware of it.

It is a dream that Peter is chasing in rebuking Jesus—and Peter *thinks* it's God's dream.

Peter, remember, has been previously certified by Jesus as an exorcist.

When he “rebukes” Jesus, the word Peter uses is the very same word
as the word Jesus uses to dispel the demons.

“*Be silent!*” says Jesus—“*Just chill*” parrots Peter.

Already, Mark tells us, Jesus has been dismissed by some people as “out of his mind;”
and branded by religious leaders as in league with the devil.

If we learn anything this week, from listening Rush Limbaugh and Rahm Emmanuel
go at each other hammer and tongs—

it is that distinguishing demons from demonizers gets quickly problematic;
and rude ranting and raving don't help matters much.

“*Get behind me, Satan!*” Will the real demon please stand up?

I suggest, however, that the difference between demonic, delusional dreams, and dreams that are divinely inspired
cannot be discerned on the basis of a politeness index, or a decibel meter.

Content counts: Is the dream a dream that, perhaps not intentionally, but still inevitably,
sets *some* over and against *others* by legitimating their prerogative and privilege?

Or is the dream a dream that—in focus and intent, in commitment and practice—
is a dream wherein peoples and nations are equally blessed?

Yes, of course, “*the devil is in the details.*” Debate is important—

until it becomes divisive and partisan, self-serving, self-justifying, self-protecting—and self-defeating.

As Mark's Jesus says: “*What will it profit to gain the whole world and forfeit your life.*”

Indeed--What can you give in return for that life?”

There is, I submit, good reason for the edge in Jesus voice when he addresses Peter.

Sensing the demonic potential in Peter's self-protectionism,

Jesus is trying to help him distinguish between a dream of security that is doomed to fail,
and the dream of God in which loss is required for gain.

This is Lent—it is not primarily a season of penitence, *per se*;

it is, rather, a season of deep down discernment.

What are the demons that threaten to divide me from myself, me from you,

us from each other, all of “us” from all of “them,”

the whole human family from the One who is dead set on drawing us deeper and deeper
into the heart of All-Embracing Love?

What dimensions of God's dream are drawing us now, more deeply than ever before?

How might listening to those fresh dimensions of God's dreaming

be helpful to us in dealing with our demons?

“*Get behind me, Satan.*”

If Jesus can say it, so can we.

THE HOLY GOSPEL OF OUR LORD JESUS CHRIST ACCORDING TO MARK

Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Phillippi.

And on the way he asked his disciples,

Who do other people say that I am?

And they answered him:

John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.

He asked them:

But who do YOU say that I am?

Peter answered him:

You are the Messiah.

And he sternly told them NOT to tell ANYONE about him.

THEN he began to teach them

that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering,

and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes

and be killed,

and after three days, rise again.

He said all this quite openly.

And Peter took him aside, and began to rebuke him.

But, turning and looking at his disciples, HE rebuked PETER.

And said: *Get behind me - - - SATAN!*

For you are setting your mind not on divine things, but on human things.

He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them:

If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves

and take up their cross, and follow me.

For those who want to save their life will lose it.

and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the Gospel, will save it.

For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life.

Indeed, what can they give in return for their life?

Those who are ashamed of me in this adulterous and sinful generation,

of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes

in the glory of his father with the holy angels.

THE GOSPEL OF THE LORD.