

Silence! Frenzied, Unclean Spirit

Thomas H. Troeger

One of the special values of the scriptures is that they express in unabashed form fears that we foolishly think we have left behind by virtue of our sophistication and technology, when in fact they continue to be rooted in our hearts. Stories about demons and exorcism fall into this category. We are, of course, thankful for the insights and therapeutic strategies of psychology and psychiatry. But when we confront destructive emotional states, especially in those we love, the pain of it is never adequately captured by diagnostic lists or interpersonal or physical explanations. The experience of it is something else altogether, both for the person who is internally tormented and for those trying to provide support, care, and relief. Having encountered these experiences in my work as a minister, I sought to write a hymn text that would help people draw upon contemporary understandings of personality while acknowledging their sense of the demonic and assuring them of Christ's restorative power.

The hymn, then, is a fusion of ancient and contemporary understandings because in my experience, these are not contradictory but complementary, each of them contributing to a fuller understanding of the total situation.

The first stanza retells the story of Christ exorcising a demon in Mark 1: 21-28. The stanza is a midrash, a form in which rabbis and poets "fill in details of settings, thoughts, motives, and talk not given by the terse biblical narrative."¹ The hymn employs this ancient form and expands the biblical material to intensify the emotive weight of the experience, drawing upon mythic language, "Flee as night before the sun." I drew this imagery from other wrestling matches in the Bible, particularly Jacob's bout with the mysterious stranger at the River Jabbok (Genesis 32: 22-32), a scene that is repeated in Wesley's poem "Come, O Thou Traveler Unknown," where the poet acknowledges in the first stanza: "with thee all night I mean to stay/and wrestle till the break of day." Thus, the midrash of "Silence! Frenzied, Unclean Spirit" is not a purely fanciful expansion of the text, but one which fits in the larger tradition of the church's theopoetic inheritance.

The second stanza turns to a radically different diction, the language of brain research and post-Freudian understandings: "the grey cells of the mind" and "twisted thoughts that grip and bind." I have a commitment not to allow religion to usurp science or science religion, but to see them work in harmony so as to express a holistic understanding of the human creature. For me the breakdown between them in much of our culture only furthers the fragmentation of human consciousness and thereby contributes to the possibility and terror of extreme emotional distress.

The final stanza is a prayer that flows from the personal encounter with the demon in stanza one and the mind's cooler analysis in stanza two. We ask Christ's healing for "the fractured, warring soul" of the tormented individual and "the fractured, warring soul" of our distressed culture that views as opposites what are in truth equally essential though fundamentally different ways of understanding the breakdown of human wholeness. ■

¹ David Curzon, ed., *Modern Poems on the Bible: An Anthology* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1994), p. 3.

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Hymn Interpretation

"Silence! Frenzied, unclean spirit,"
cried God's healing, holy One.
"Cease your ranting!
Flesh can't bear it.
Flee as night before the sun"
At Christ's voice the demon trembled,
from its victim madly rushed,
while the crowd that was assembled
stood in wonder, stunned and hushed.

Lord, the demons still are thriving
in the grey cells of the mind:
tyrant voices shrill and driving,
twisted thoughts that grip and bind,
doubts that stir the heart to panic,
fears distorting reason's sight,
guilt that makes our loving frantic,
dreams that cloud the soul with fright.

Silence, Lord, the unclean spirit,
in our mind and in our heart.
Speak your word that when we hear it
all our demons shall depart.
Clear our thought and calm our feeling,
still the fractured, warring soul.
By the power of your healing
make us faithful, true and whole.

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