

Year B\*Epiphany 4\*2012\*He Commands Even the Unclean Spirits  
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Two of my saints come together in this red volume.  
One is one of my personal saint Father Howard William Barks. . . my priest.

The other is the author of this book, C. S. Lewis.

C. S. Lewis was my first and truest literary spiritual mentor.  
I devoured his writings.  
Then I digested them.  
Then I returned to them for countless nourishing spiritual meals.

There was a short period of time in my spiritual adolescence when I rebelled against my mentor. But after a decade or so of pouting I returned to him grateful for his wisdom, creativity, and stubbornness.

This is his book *The Screwtape Letters*.

On the surface it is a book about demons. It is about two devils in particular a Senior temptor named Screwtape and his Junior protégé, Wormwood. Screwtape is writing letters to Wormwood with advice on how to tempt his “patient” away from the “Enemy” and into hell. The patient is an ordinary man. The Enemy, always capitalized, is God.

What the story is really about is the dynamic of temptation to evil, the path of resistance to temptation, and our hope in Christ to overcome evil.

So much of this important area of the spiritual life has been cartoonized or lampooned or sensationalized that many modern Christians have given up on the devil and the demonic as a meaningful way to wrestle with evil.

Lewis saw that happening in 1941 when he wrote in the preface to *The Screwtape Letters*. . . “There are two equal and opposite errors into which our race can fall about the devils. One is to disbelieve in their existence. The other is to believe, and to feel an excessive and unhealthy interest in them. They themselves are equally pleased by both errors, and hail the materialist and the magician with the same delight.” (Preface, p.3)

I have not suspended acknowledgment of an evil called the devil. And it's tough to engage the Jesus of the gospels, especially the Jesus in Mark's gospel without coming to grips with an evil which is not personal sin, or corporate systemic malice, but real chaotic, focused, malevolence, that is out for one thing, your personal destruction, and mine, and all that God is trying to do in and through us.

Listen again to the gospel.

Jesus and his disciples went to Capernaum; and when the sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught. <sup>22</sup> They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes. <sup>23</sup> Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, <sup>24</sup> and he cried out, "What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God." <sup>25</sup> But Jesus rebuked him, saying, "Be silent, and come out of him!" <sup>26</sup> And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him. <sup>27</sup> They were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, "What is this? A new teaching—with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him." <sup>28</sup> At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.<sup>1</sup>

Now Jesus knew all about personal sin and had a lot to say about forgiving and healing it.

Jesus knew all about institutionalized evil in the political, social, and religious groupings of men and women. He confronted systemic evil in the family system, the temple system, and the political system as courageously as any great prophet.

What amazed people today was not the courage and insight and compassion it took to forgive people sins or confront systemic injustice.

What people are amazed about today is that "He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him."

Jesus' authority is over every kind of evil.

Our sins.

Our wicked systems.

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<sup>1</sup>*The Holy Bible : New Revised Standard Version*. 1989 (Mk 1:21-28). Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.

And the Devil.

Here's the thing. . .and forget both Hollywood and the funny pages.

The point is we have an enemy.

Someone is out to destroy us.

It's not a physical enemy, though the results of its destructive work has devastating physical consequences.

Saint Paul said it best in his letter to the Ephesians,

**For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.**<sup>2</sup>

This scripture is clear in our tradition in identifying the places we must engage the battle against evil.

There's evil in ourselves.

There's evil in our systems.

I believe I spend a lot of time working on those areas with you.

But there is also a cosmic power we struggle against.

When I was a child and the time for truth-telling came my mother would say, "Remember, God is listening and so is the devil." It turns out the devil is doing a lot more than listening.

He/she/it is trying to undermine everything we hold dear,  
every truth we are discovering,  
every progress we make in the spiritual life,  
every joy we legitimately delight in,  
this thing, whatever it is wants destroyed.

Now you can be a very good Christian and not believe in the devil.

But there's one thing we must all recognize.

*(Go down to the windows and talk about where we are in sacred time and space. Talk about the two voices, the voice of God and the voice of the temptor.)*

I love these two windows. I hope you'll begin to use these windows. These two windows fit this time of year perfectly. These late days in January are always in the middle or towards the end of Epiphany.

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<sup>2</sup>*The Holy Bible : New Revised Standard Version*. 1989 (Eph 6:12). Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.

One window begins the season and one ends it.  
The story of the baptism of Jesus begins Epiphany and  
the story of the temptation of Jesus in the wilderness ends Epiphany on the  
First Sunday in Lent.

Remember these two stories. Each has a voice speaking to Jesus.  
At the baptism it is the voice of God lifting Jesus up and proclaiming him  
as God's beloved Son!"  
In the desert the voice is the voice of Satan who seeks to undermine and  
destroy Jesus' identity as God's beloved Son.

We live between these two voices;  
the voice which chooses us as beloved daughters and sons. and,  
the voice which longs to separate us from God and from goodness forever.

You can be a good Christian without believing in the devil but it's difficult  
to be a mature Christian without recognizing that destructive voice.

There is a voice you heard one day that sought to destroy you,  
mislead lead,  
separate you from God,  
from your loved ones,  
from your Church.

What did it say?  
Who cares about your family?  
Who cares about your reputation?  
What does it matter if you try to fight me, you'll never get rid of me?

Do you know that voice?  
Have you heard it before.  
It doesn't care about you,  
or truth,  
or beauty,  
or goodness,  
or justice,  
or God!

It wants to devour us and everything we love.  
It wants to tempt us to misery then enjoy itself as we suffer.

It uses thought to begin its infernal work.

Simple thoughts.

There's a wonderful passage in A.A.'s big book.  
Listen for the first thought.  
The Devil's thought.

This is Bill W., the founder of AA, talking.

'Our first example is a friend we shall call Jim. This man has a charming wife and family. He inherited a lucrative automobile agency. He had a commendable World War record. He is a good salesman. Everybody likes him. He is an intelligent man, normal so far as we can see, except for a nervous disposition. He did no drinking until he was thirty-five. In a few years he became so violent when intoxicated that he had to be committed. On leaving the asylum he came into contact with us.

We told him what we knew of alcoholism and the answer we had found. He made a beginning. His family was reassembled, and he began to work as a salesman for the business he had lost through drinking. All went well for a time, but he failed to enlarge his spiritual life. To his consternation, he found himself drunk half a dozen times in rapid succession. On each of these occasions we worked with him, reviewing carefully what had happened. He agreed he was a real alcoholic and in a serious condition. He knew he faced another trip to the asylum if he kept on. Moreover, he would lose his family for whom he had a deep affection. Yet he got drunk again. We asked him to tell us exactly how it happened. This is his story: "I came to work on Tuesday morning. I remember I felt irritated that I had to be a salesman for a concern I once owned. I had a few words with the brass, but nothing serious. Then I decided to drive to the country and see one of my prospects for a car. On the way I felt hungry so I stopped at a roadside place where they have a bar. I had no intention of drinking. I just thought I would get a sandwich. I also had the notion that I might find a customer for a car at this place, which was familiar for I had been going to it for years. I had eaten there many times during the months I was sober. I sat down at a table and ordered a sandwich and a glass of milk. Still no thought of

drinking. I ordered another sandwich and decided to have another glass of milk.

“Suddenly the thought crossed my mind that if I were to put an ounce of whiskey in my milk it couldn’t hurt me on a full stomach. I ordered a whiskey and poured it into the milk. I vaguely sense I was not being any too smart, but I was reassured as I was taking the whiskey on a full stomach. The experiment went so well that I ordered another whiskey and poured it into more milk. That didn’t seem to bother me so I tried another.”

Thus started one more journey to the asylum for Jim.

“Suddenly the thought crossed my mind. . .” Jim says.  
Where did that thought come from?

Now you don’t need to believe in devils to see the power of that story. But it’s very interesting to me that our tradition has always understood the devil to work through such simple thoughts. That’s why we have to forget about Hollywood. There is usually nothing fantastic about the devil’s activity. He/she/it works most often through simple suggestion.

“Suddenly a thought crossed my mind.”

And don’t fall for this thought, “Well I don’t have any problem with alcohol! He can’t be talking to me!”

Gluttony may not be the devil’s doorstep for you.

It could be thoughts of

pride,

envy,

lust,

anger,

greed,

or sloth.

The first thought,

the devil’s thought can be almost anything.

I can handle one \_\_\_\_\_ you fill in the blank.

I’m not hurting anyone.

What she doesn’t know won’t hurt her.

We can do anything to protect ourselves.  
I can call him again maybe he'll be different this time.

The devil is a powerful, subtle foe.

In fact he is too powerful and too subtle for us.  
Saint Mark the Evangelist knew that.  
The people of Jesus' day knew that.  
C. S. Lewis knew that.

But here's the truth.  
Jesus has conquered the devil.  
Remember the devil is not the opposite of Jesus or God. God has no  
opposite. If the devil has an opposite it would be the Archangel Michael.  
Jesus as the Second Person of the Holy Trinity has destroyed the power of  
the enemy.  
That's what amazed the people who met him.  
He commanded even the unclean spirits.

People saw his compassion,  
they saw his courage,  
they knew what those things were.  
They saw those things in themselves and in others.

But they never saw anyone who was more powerful than the unclean  
spirits.

Every day we pray.  
Deliver us from evil.  
Jesus can deliver us from evil, all evil.  
Or as the Lord's prayer is often translated Jesus will "Deliver us from the  
evil one."

Jesus told a story once. It was about all this. About how he understood his  
own work. He told it one day when people were saying he was crazy, out  
of his mind, and even said Jesus was possessed by a demon. He said, "**How  
can Satan cast out Satan?** <sup>24</sup> **If a kingdom is divided against itself, that  
kingdom cannot stand.** <sup>25</sup> **And if a house is divided against itself, that house  
will not be able to stand.** <sup>26</sup> **And if Satan has risen up against himself and is  
divided, he cannot stand, but his end has come.** <sup>27</sup> **But no one can enter a**

strong man's house and plunder his property without first tying up the strong man; then indeed the house can be plundered."<sup>3</sup>

Jesus is the strong man.  
He has bound Satan and grabbed us all away from him.  
We are held safe in his arms.

Satan is not happy about this and since he cannot defeat Jesus he will try and lure us away from Jesus.  
Do not be fooled.  
Hold on to Jesus.

Now listen to me!

I'm not saying "Just believe in Jesus and everything will be okay."

I'm saying, "Hold on to Jesus for dear life. Cling to Jesus as if your life depended on it. Cry out for Jesus to hold you tight against all the wiles of the devil. . . then. . . you'll be all right."

We're going to visit this topic again. In just four weeks we'll read this from Mark's gospel. **And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.**<sup>4</sup>

Think about it.  
Wonder about it.  
Because, in a few weeks, the devil will be back.

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<sup>3</sup>*The Holy Bible : New Revised Standard Version*. 1989 (Mk 3:19-27). Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.

<sup>4</sup>*The Holy Bible : New Revised Standard Version*. 1989 (Mk 1:12-13). Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.