

“Moving Target”
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It is a good time for TV. Many of my favorite shows are popping up again with new and exciting seasons coming soon: *House of Dragons*. *Slow Horses*.

And one currently streaming on Max/HBO is *True Detective*. Do you all watch this? It’s a phenomenal series overall. There are four seasons, and in each the setting is intriguing, the plot is action-packed, and the characters are complicated. The latest season stars Jodie Foster, yes please! And it is set in the terribly dark, bitterly cold landscape of Ennis, Alaska.

I won’t spoil anything here. But the opening scene shows a native hunter tracking caribou. Something spooks the animals, it’s the wind screaming or the world heaving or something bad thing approaching that we can’t see on screen. And suddenly the beautiful reindeer are gracefully leaping off a cliff to their own deaths. The scene is set, and we are hooked.

Will more deaths follow this opening stampede? The answer of course is yes. But what is going on here? Is it this fierce, glacial landscape, with ghosts of ancestors past, that is the problem? Or is there a new evil loose in the world? Is there someone capable of saving them? Or are these complicated detectives just part of the problem? You can see how this has all the makings of a splendid series. There are plenty of demons to choose from here.

Evil is a moving target.

In the passage for today, Jesus tackles evil too. It’s early in his ministry. He goes to Capernum to teach. It’s a dusty village by the sea of Galilee. And he walks through the arch of the synagogue, takes up a scroll, from the prophet Isaiah, and begins to teach. As the crowd is oohing and aahing over his clearly apparent authority and grace, a man pops up out of nowhere and interrupts him.

Something is clearly up here. In this translation, the NRSVUE, the writer says the man has an unclean spirit. Other versions say he is a man deeply disturbed. One even says, he is a man with a defiling and demonic possession. Whatever it is, something is definitely happening, and the conflict of the episode is clear. It is Jesus versus the evil that moves through the world.

In his foundational text, *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology*, Dr. Daniel Migliore says, “Evil is neither illusion nor mere appearance nor a gradually disappearing force in the world.” Writing at the turn of the century, he says an earlier era might have thought of evil as the result of cultural lag or inadequate education or insufficient social planning and might have been convinced of the gradual and inevitable progress that the cosmos and humankind were making toward a paradise in which all suffering and evil would be eliminated. But we, at the beginning of the 21st century, know that all such faith in progress has been discredited.” Evil is here.

But what is Evil? Evil, it seems is a moving target.

You know it is not as easy for a Presbyterian PC(USA) pastor to conjure up demons. I would have better luck as a Hollywood screenwriter. Descriptions of love, encouragement for the church in current events of today, sure I got you. But evil and demon possessions, what are we Pentecostal? Catholic? Is this a reboot of the exorcist?

My go-to podcasters Rev. Eric Fistler and Rev. Rob McCoy of Pulpit Fiction say about this passage: Demons they say could be a host of different things. The Methodist pastor says, *“Demons could be mental illness or addiction that at times can be crippling or binding.”* *“But that has its own red flags, a lot of people have dealt with trauma who had mental illness and were told they had demons. You have to be careful, I would describe the SYMPTOMS of mental illness as unclean.”*

“And what about systems?” the UCC pastor wonders. *“If anything is demonic it is racism, and the other oppressive systems of the world. But of course, we have to remember that Jesus offers forgiveness and redemption for those who participate in those systems.”*

They conclude by recommending that the pastor only talk about his own demons – to avoid any overreach. But then they remember preaching isn’t a therapy session, and we are back to square one.

For his part, Methodist minister, Martin Thielen in his book, “What is the Least I can Believe and Still be a Christian” takes a broader look and sees evil as the pain and suffering caused by bad choices we humans make. We have free will and we sin. These choices cause untold suffering, including terrorism, torture, child abuse, rape and school shootings.” This definition is pretty cut and dry, but then he goes and complicates things. He says, It’s not just the bad things people do but the good things we don’t do. We don’t speak up and act out. We turn a blind eye, and we forget to engage, and more. That is evil too.

So what is evil? Evil, it seems is a moving target.

Jesus for his part sees evil clearly and casts it out. He identifies the Unclean Spirit with no problem. It is anomalous, antithetical to the message he preaches. The demon opposes God’s will and distorts the good of creation. Jesus does not condemn the person, he carefully separates the demonic spirit from the individual, and then frees the man for new life once the evil has left.

But that is Jesus.

What about the normal people? The disciples, who like us are not divine, how does Jesus encourage them to confront evil? What do typical folks do in the face of demons?

Funnily enough, Jesus tells the people who are demon-freed to keep quiet. It's called the Messianic Secret. And we see it develop right after this episode. After he casts out the unclean spirit, people start to swarm him for healings. Jesus goes to his disciple's mother's house and casts out her terrible fever. Then a leper tracks down Jesus and begs to be healed. And in all of these situations, Jesus tells them to be silent about his powers over evil. Even the demons, Jesus commands, to stay quiet.

Most often scholars think of the Messianic Secret as related to Jesus's identity. That he is trying to shield his divinity – for now. Jesus doesn't want the word to get out yet for some reason. Lest he suffer John the Baptist's fate, or because the crowds are too much, or because it's not yet his time, the hour of the cross has not come.

But what if this command to hush up is not only, about Jesus own fate but about our human response to his power too. Don't go blabbing about this, Jesus seems to say. Because if you go saying the demon is gone from so and so, you'll be ready to say the demon has headed over there – and all of a sudden evil is named. Don't let it land, Jesus says. Keep evil a moving target to keep your focus on me.

For her part, Madeliene L'Engle says:

[I believe that consistently we need to look for good, and not for evil, that when we look for evil we call up evil, while heaven comes closer when we acknowledge it.](#)

For his part, Karl Barth, great Reformed theologian, says "evil is the alien power of "nothingness" that arises mysteriously from what God does not will in the act of creation." He says God alone is able to conquer the power of nothingness: It should be rated as low as possible in relation to God and as high as possible in relation to ourselves" (Migliore, p.127-28).

There are critiques here – an invitation to passivity, more exploration of protest as a Christian response – but Barth himself was very active in the church struggle during the Nazi period in Germany. He started not from his ability to identify evil but from his confidence in the superiority of God's grace that empowered him to fight against seemingly impossible odds.

Daniel Migliore says, "When individual human beings, groups or nations sure of their innocence and convinced of the utter wickedness of their enemies, claim for themselves the right and the power to rid the world of evil, they often become themselves agents of evil" (128).

The church, of course, has done untold damage by identifying evil in the world. There was the demon of being gay – prayed and counseled and hidden away. Demon of being a woman – subjugated, abused, mistreated. The Demon of sex – ignored, repressed, attacked, shamed.

Maybe this is why the mainline shies away from acknowledging evil at all because we are afraid, we will get it wrong. And maybe that means that this time, we got it right.

Scripture tells us not to participate in or perpetuate evil. But we are asked not to dwell on it too.

Let evil be a moving target and keep your eyes and your heart and your life fixed on Christ instead.

Thanks be to God. Alleluia! Amen!