

**Sermon, The Rev. Canon Allen L. Lewis  
Diocese of South Dakota**

**February 1, 2009**

Epiphany IV

*Disclaimer: Sermons are meant to be preached/felt and are not refined documents.*

*If you want to really enjoy/understand this sermon read it out loud.*

I am intrigued by the words “unclean spirits,” which the biblical writers tend to use interchangeably with the word “demon” or “demonic spirit.” “unclean spirit” as used here is used in the sense of that which is opposite of “holy.” Of course, the first images that come to mind are from horror books like those written by Stephen King or movies such as “The Poltergeist.” Thus, the images conjured in my mind seem to be talking about others – people who are different from me and ones who always find themselves in weird outlandish situations. In other words, NOT ME! But this is too glib, too easy to dismiss.

Perhaps you think that we, you and I, no longer have “unclean spirits” in ourselves or around us? If you do, I (if I were you) would take a very hard look at such assumptions. They are real. We encounter demons/unclean spirits everyday. You just probably don’t name them as such. So let me help you a little: I can name one of my very own demons. I have been possessed with an angry demon since I was quite young. It is a very real part of me, that catches me usually by surprise and makes me do and say the most outlandish things. Enough of me for now, this isn’t true confessions time. However, other unclean spirits I have met quite recently in other

people are deep fear/anxiety, depression, road rage, overt sexual dependency, to name but a few. Most of us have our own or have met someone we care about that at times are seemingly possessed by that which steals life. I wonder if these unclean spirits might recognize the power of Jesus and call out to him. Or do we tame them with alcohol, medicines (Prozac), working too much, over eating.

Here in today's Gospel we see evil and goodness come face to face. Evil, which feeds on life, meets life in all its wonder and abundance. The emptiness, the cavity in our lives caused by evil, is filled by the presence of God in our lives as we meet Jesus face to face. How to explain this? It is so hard to put into words. Words in this instance just seem like words – a commercial on TV that we have learned to tune out. Yet this reality of abundant life is so apparent, so wonderful once we experience it.

I went one day over 20 years ago to pray with a family I knew very well. There daughter had, again, taken drugs in another attempt to end her life. We had been told by the doctor that the chances were almost non-existent that she would ever regain consciousness and if she did, she would be severely damaged. So we prayed (nothing else we could do!), we cried, we prayed, we laid hands on her, we cried, we prayed. That day seemed to stand outside of time. The day passed, neither fast or slow. Occasionally the doctor or nurse would update us on her condition: "no change." Sometime that afternoon a nurse came out to us and said she would like to talk to us. So one of us replied and said, "why doesn't she (the doctor) come out and talk to us?" "Not the doctor" the nurse said, "your daughter! I have never been closer to God than

at that moment. God had found us and filled our empty cavities with life, in all its joy and wonder.

Amazing! This happened 20 years ago and the daughter is still very much with us and we will NEVER forget. It seems just like yesterday.

I've witnessed this meeting with abundant life several times, but I'd like to share one more example that I read about recently. It is written by Gary King of Roanoke, VA. He has a six year old autistic grandson. To his grandson, a hug can feel like an assault. A haircut can be torture. Even someone sharing a room with him can be too much. He often says to me, "get out of my face," even when I'm on the other side of the room. If he leaves the room, he will point his finger at me and say, "YOU, stay here. Don't follow me." He wears only red shirts turned inside out so that the tags and seams don't irritate his skin. He will sit quietly, wrapped in the frayed baby blanket he calls "friend" and stare out the window for hours.

I know it is the chaos in his mind that makes him avoid people, or any sensory input. I'm grateful, says his grandfather, for those times when his mind is calm and he can risk a short dip in the pool of sensations. Then he will muss my hair, wrestle with me, chase me around the house, and hug me tight. When he comes to visit, he jumps out of the car, runs across the lawn and leaps into my arms yelling, "Papaw, you found me!" (Pause, repeat) He is a constant reminder that, in this life, there is nothing so wonderful as to be found.

Unclean spirits create holes in our lives. The first rule of holes: when you're in one, stop digging. The second rule of holes: when you're in one, you, yourself, by yourself cannot fill it in, you just manage to bury yourself. It takes help: help to lift you out and help to fill in the hole. Such help comes when you and I are found by abundant life: God in Jesus Christ. For God in Jesus Christ is our help to fill in the holes that unclean spirits make in our lives.

May such grace find each of us!

Amen.