



“Demon Possessed”
Scripture – Luke 8:26-39
Sermon preached by Gregory Knox Jones
Sunday, June 23, 2019

Each week in worship, we approach the Scriptures like miners panning for gold. We sift through the stories that portray the ministry and teachings of Jesus confident that we will find precious stones such as wisdom and guidance, strength and hope. Much of the time the meaning of a passage is not difficult to discover; our task is to ponder ways to apply the treasure to our lives.

On most Sundays, we pluck a passage from first century Palestine, and plop it down in 21st century North America without taking into account the different circumstances. With many passages, it makes little difference because the message remains consistent regardless of the historical and cultural backdrop. However, that is not the case with today’s passage. Reminding ourselves of the setting of this story reveals the way it functions on two levels.

Frankly, our first reaction to hearing this account might be to skip it altogether because it is such a bizarre tale. In ancient times, people believed that many illnesses were caused by demons. The path to a cure? Perform an exorcism!

Moreover, in this story, Jesus and the demons carry on a conversation with one another before the evil spirits beg to enter nearby pigs. Jesus grants the demons permission to enter the swine and when they do, the pigs dash down the steep bank and plunge into the water sealing their fate. We are supposed to make sense of this?

Read literally, our story stretches reason and logic beyond the breaking point. It can only be placed in a category with Harry Potter and Captain Marvel. However, read through a different set of lenses we might be able to step into this story.

Our gospel writer informs us that Jesus and his disciples have sailed to a country opposite Galilee. This is his way of saying they have left Jewish land and entered Gentile territory – modern day Jordan. As soon as Jesus steps out of the boat a man confronts him. A man, we are told, who has demons, and who lives outside of town in the cemetery. For a long time he has worn no clothes and his residence is among the tombs. The Gospel of Mark, which also tells this story, includes the details that the man howls and mutilates himself with stones.

It seems evident that our writer is describing a man with severe mental illness. Of course, this was centuries before modern psychology and a scientific understanding of diseases of the mind. So the writer used available categories to describe the man’s condition. Severe emotional disturbance was believed to be the result of being possessed by demons.

Today, we know otherwise. But, if you or a loved one suffers from mental illness, you may have no problem naming the disease a demon, because of its destructive power. Mental illness is a dark force that disrupts – and in some cases destroys people’s lives. And not only the lives of those who possess the disease, but it can devour the lives of family and friends.

Some who have a mental illness will tell you that it feels as if a demon is tormenting them. It can require enormous energy to do things most of us take for granted – getting out of bed in the morning, fixing breakfast, choosing what to wear, and speaking to people.

One of the reasons living with a mental illness is so challenging is because the majority of people fail to understand illnesses of the mind. If you suffer from anxiety, it does not help for someone to tell you that you simply need to calm yourself. If you suffer from depression, you cannot slay the dragon simply by thinking cheery thoughts. If you suffer from anorexia, you cannot recover simply by drinking milkshakes.

If you break your hip or you are diagnosed with cancer, people will empathize with you. If you have mental illness, many will blame you for having a weak character.

We can do better than that. We do not possess a magic pill or a perfect incantation to heal someone’s mental illness, any more than you or I can heal someone with cancer. But rather than heaping on guilt, we can express our concern. Rather than stigmatizing, we can show our support. Rather than ostracizing, we can welcome.

Returning to our passage, we read that Jesus questions the demons, asking them to divulge their name. The reply is, “Legion,” and this answer signals us that this story is communicating on two levels. The word “legion” represents a large number, which indicates that this man has not one demon tormenting him, but many. He is possessed with a legion of demons.

However, the *primary* meaning of the word “legion” in the first century was to describe a military unit of the Roman army. A legion was a division of the Roman army comprised of 5,000 soldiers.

Since the Roman army literally occupied all of the territory in this region – both Jewish and Gentile – those hearing this story would picture in their mind the Roman troops who were the powerful demons dominating their daily existence. Not only was this man possessed by demons, their land, their economy, and their legal system were *possessed* by demons – the Romans.

So, on one level, the man tormented by demons was someone who suffered from mental illness. On another level, this man represented everyone hearing the story. They were demonized by the military occupation which kept them in poverty and in fear.

When the story tells us that the pigs filled with demons rushed into the sea and drowned, it was what Jesus and all of the townspeople wanted to see happen to the Romans. Some scholars point out that there is an echo here from the foundational story of the Jewish people – the Exodus. When Moses liberated the Hebrew people from slavery in Egypt and they escaped into the wilderness, the Egyptian army pursued them. But the Hebrews’ freedom was assured when the Egyptians drowned in the Red Sea. Similarly, our storyteller paints a vision of what will one day happen to the Romans. They will be vanquished and the people will be free.

Returning to our story, after the pigs drowned, we read that those who were tending the pigs rushed into town to tell everyone what happened. The townspeople come out to see for themselves. They find the man who had been tormented by demons in his right mind. Do they celebrate this dramatic turn of events? Do they roll out the red carpet for Jesus and hand him the keys to the city? Not at all. Our text says the people were frightened and told Jesus to get out of their town.

Why would they insist on Jesus leaving almost immediately after he arrived? Some say it is because Jesus put a dent in their local economy when the pigs plunged into the lake.

I don't buy it. I think it was because Jesus was playing with fire. His symbolic act of sending the Romans into the abyss was dangerous, revolutionary rhetoric.

New Testament scholar Warren Carter says that with "(A man possessed by demons), tombs, and pigs charging into the sea, the scene is like political satire. It mocks the (Roman) Empire's pretensions with visions of their demise. Casting out demons resists and rejects the devil and the devil's leading empire, Rome, and anticipates the future triumph of God's empire."¹

Jesus was intent on disrupting and dismantling evil in whatever form he found it. He wanted to transform individuals and entire societies so that people could flourish as God intends. The main mission of Jesus was to spread the kingdom of God, and that meant overcoming whatever obstacles stood in its way. On an individual level, Jesus wants to exorcise the demons we carry within us so that we can be transformed into people who are healthy and whole. On a societal level, Jesus wants to rid us of the demons that prevent the kingdom of God from spreading.

Jesus calls on those who lived under the spell of greed to confront their demon. Jesus calls on those who are abusive of their spouse or children to confront their demon. Jesus calls on those who are engaged in corrupt business practices to confront their demon. Jesus calls on those who play loose with the truth to confront their demon. Jesus calls on those who bully others to confront their demon. Jesus calls on those who have an addiction to alcohol or drugs or sex to confront their demon.

All of us carry demons of one sort or another. Jesus calls on us to face them squarely and to seek the healing and transforming power of God.

On the national level, we do not live under an occupying power in the form of a foreign army. However, one of the insidious occupying powers in our nation is racism. Since the early days of our country, we have been possessed by the demon of discrimination. We have witnessed progress by outlawing slavery, and passing laws against discriminatory practices in hiring, real estate, education, sports, and more. But while laws can help, they cannot transform the human heart. That requires a spiritual transformation. In his letter to the Church in Ephesus, the Apostle Paul wrote that we do not struggle against flesh and blood, but against spiritual forces of evil.

As followers of Jesus, we are to confront darkness with light, evil with good, betrayal with forgiveness, despair with hope, and hate with love.

If, like Jesus, we see every person as a child of God, we will treat them with the same love and respect we desire for ourselves, and we will become partners with God in spreading God's kingdom on earth.

NOTES

1. Warren Carter, *Matthew and the Margins*, (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2005), p. 211.

Prayers of the People – Sudie Niesen Thompson

God of All Time and All Creation,

This is the day that you have made; we rejoice and are glad in it!

We give thanks that you have gathered us from east and west, north and south to enjoy the fellowship of this family of faith, to unite our voices in prayer and praise, to rest in your presence.

Draw near to us in this hour, and open us to your Spirit moving among us. Sustain those who are weary; encourage those who are weak; bring peace to anxious minds and hope to despairing hearts. And surprise all of us, we pray, with glimpses of your grace.

Compassionate God — We pray for people known and unknown to us, who seek your healing; we pray for communities near and far that yearn for your wholeness; we pray for this creation that is groaning for redemption. We lift before you:

Those with ailing minds or aching bodies, those ensnared by illness or addiction, those whose spirits are heavy or whose souls are restless;

Those whose days are waning; those who helplessly watch loved ones slip away; those who feel their lives are defined by loss.

Those suffering from a lack of resources or a poverty of opportunity; those living in neglected neighborhoods or communities torn by conflict; those who feel discarded or devalued, or who have long suffered the effects of injustice.

Be present, O God, with these sisters and brothers: through the compassionate care of those called to tend hurting minds and bodies; the healing touch of family and friends; the comforting embrace of community; the prophetic witness of advocates and change-makers; and the generous service of strangers who reflect your love.

Help us — the church of Jesus Christ — to embody his grace in word and deed. Free us from selfish impulses and cast out the demons of prejudice and apathy, so that we might be agents of healing and transformation in this world. By your Spirit open our ears to hear your liberating Word, open our mouths to proclaim your justice, open our hands to offer your grace, and send us out as instruments of your astounding love.

We pray in the name of your Son, our Lord, and offer the words he taught us:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen.