

**2 Pentecost
June 23, 2019**

**In the name of the God of all Creation,
The God alive in each of us as God was alive in Jesus,
And the power of God known in the Spirit.
Amen.**

The gospel this week about the Gerasene demoniac is really a bizarre story. A nameless man has been exiled to the margins of human existence. He's filthy naked in public. He can't control his speech. He is so violent that people can't come near him. All attempts to restrain him have failed. He lives in a graveyard. He exhibits the most common form of self-harm even today ... self-mutilation. The people of the time added it all up and using the language of the day called it demon possession.

The prelude to the story actually begins a few verses before our reading when Jesus got in a boat on the Galilean side of the Sea of Galilee with his disciples and says, "Let us go across to the other side of the lake." On the way they encounter a violent storm, and Jesus calms the wind. When they land on the other side they are in the country of the Gerasenes. They have crossed over a boundary: geographically ... this is the other side of the lake; and theologically ... this is Gentile territory. One question that has occurred to me when I read these two stories: Why did Jesus want to go across the lake in the first place?

After Jesus calms the storm he stepped from the boat of the now-serene waters of the Sea of Galilee and he immediately meets another storm, this time in human form ... this man possessed by demons. Luke describes the possessed as "a man of the city" ... in other words, a man used to living among others and following the usual conventions most city dwellers follow. This suggests just how far this man has fallen. He wears no clothes. His home is the tombs. He greets Jesus shouting "at the top of his voice". But these signs of his desolation are just the symptoms of an even deeper loss ... the loss of himself ... an existential death. When he begins to speak, we do not hear the man speak ... instead, it is the unclean spirit that manifests itself as multiple demons that speaks. Bound by humans who fear him, bound by demons who possess him, this man has lost almost everything as he is driven far from his home. The graveyard dwelling of the man suggests his feeling of being dead in the midst of the life around him.

This story is about what it means to fall to the bottom of life where all is lost, and life itself becomes a way of death. The man has lost his community ... his family ... his very own identity. Those who once knew him as friend, colleague, or brother now know him as community menace and failure ... even a threat.

But, don't we all know people who are fighting this same kind of battle ... the battle of powers beyond their control? Perhaps it is a brother or sister, a son or daughter, an uncle or aunt ... maybe even a parent ... or a child. Maybe it is a relative of a neighbor ... or a former co-worker

... or maybe the nameless person you encounter on the street. However small our world may seem, most of us know someone ... or know OF someone ... who lives in a world similar to the Gerasene demoniac ... people possessed by a force beyond their control.

From time to time Caren and I will take an evening stroll down St. George Street ... a sort of people watching excursion. The other evening we were struck by the tourist from other countries speaking languages other than English ... French, Spanish, German, Italian, Asian languages, Middle-Eastern languages, and ones I could not even come close to identifying. And as we walked down the street encountering families and traveling companions from all over the world there came a man walking quickly with a very determined look on his face ... and he was talking to himself ... or maybe to the voices he was hearing in his head. He was talking in a gibberish that could have only made sense to him.

We do not have to look far in our world today to find people whose lives have been captured by the demon of mental illness. They lose the capacity to self-regulate and in the process begin to move ... or get forced ... to the edge of our world.

When I served St. Mark's in Toledo, Ohio we had such a man in our congregation. His name is David ... and David lived with schizophrenia. David would sometimes talk to the voices he heard speaking to him ... often with loud profanity ... sometimes even while I was preaching my sermon.

David had grown up in a nearby suburb, earned an engineering degree from the University of Michigan, married and bought a home. But then, in his late twenties, his demon began showing up ... he lost his job, then his marriage and home. He tried living with his parents ... but that didn't work. So, he ended up in a group home for people with mental and emotional disabilities near the church. David had fallen far ... and sadly, he was well aware of it. He had lost his "self" ... he had lost his community and his family. However ... somehow ... he also found St. Mark's.

We could not exorcize David of his demons, but when his medication worked, it did a pretty good job of holding the demon at bay. What St. Mark's was able to do was to provide David with a new community where he was accepted ... and even loved. Most often David sat right in the front row with the children of the congregation ... and they delighted in his presence with them. And, when David began talking to his voices out loud in the service, someone in the congregation would usually go sit next to him and gently put an arm around his shoulder. Of course, there were some who were frightened by David when he was acting out, but even they were accepting that it was a demon controlling him ... he was still a child of God worthy of God's love, and therefore the community's love as well.

However, mental illness is not the only demon that may drive us into the tombs of life. Perhaps we, ourselves, have known what it is to be at the mercy of powers that have no mercy. They drive us away from all we know and love to the very brink of life ... to the graveyard while life goes on all around it.

Luke writes that the people of his town had driven this man "into the wilds" ... an interesting word choice, since Jesus too had journeyed into the wilderness where he had battled forces that sought to undercut his unique calling and personhood. Jesus understood what it meant to be in a wilderness.

The story of the calming of the storm on the Sea of Galilee and the exorcism of the demons from the Gerasene demoniac are twin stories ... they are about calming the troubles of life. And, when we take seriously what Jesus took seriously, we, too, can be restored with the gift of the calmed waters of inner being and purpose.

I'm convinced that we all live ... or have lived ... with demons in our lives at one time or another. Anger and resentment are demons when they hold a power over us. Prejudices such as racism and homophobia are demons when they hold us prisoners. Addictions of all sorts are demons because we lose our "self" to them. Yet, we too can know the experience of casting out those demons. We too can know the experience of re-entering life fully clothed and in our "right mind."

There are other characters in this story ... the people from the nearby towns and farms who came to see what has happened to the man. Interestingly, they respond with fear. Rather than rejoice that this man's demons have been exorcized, they hurry Jesus back into his boat and gratefully see him gone. We humans get so used to the patterns of our lives ... the dysfunctions, the failures, the unresolved problems ... that we sometimes resign ourselves to defeat rather than risk something new. Sometimes we just repeat our old behaviors over and over ... we get bound in the shackles again and again and again.

Striking out in radically new directions is frightening indeed, opening everything up once again to our sense of futility and pain. At times we feel it may be better to drive the hope away and live with familiar defeat. Yet this story is a story of hope for both the possessed man and the community, if only we will claim it.

I began this sermon pointing out the boundaries that Jesus crossed to bring the "good news of the Kingdom of God" to the people on the other side of the lake. And, crossing that boundary brought healing to the demoniac, but fear to the populace, for they wanted Jesus to return from whence he came. But, if you ask any true explorer ... whether of literal wilderness or the wilderness of our minds and spirit ... fullest life is that which is lived at the frontier ... crossing the boundaries. Sometimes, as we cross those boundaries, we will encounter those with demons ... maybe even our own. Then it becomes the opportunity for profound healing that brings us back to our right mind ... back to our "self."

This story isn't just about the miraculous power of Jesus to cast out demons and heal a very disturbed person. It is also about what happens to us ... and people like us ... here, today. And it is about finding a new life after living in a graveyard. It may take crossing a boundary. It may

mean facing storms in our lives. It may include the powers that overcome us and have no mercy. Yet the healing gives us a new life ... and a life among the living.

Amen.