

Rio Rancho Presbyterian

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## THIS WORLD WITH DEVILS FILLED

Luke 8: 26-39

I had two friends with doctorates in New Testament, Holland from Harvard and Bill from Berkeley. Once I was discussing our text with Holland and I asked him point blank, “Do you believe in demons?” Well, my friend began hemming and hawing, finally ending our conversation like this, “Hey, Frank, gotta go, talk to you tomorrow.” Now that’s called “fancy dancing.”

Then I asked my good friend Bill a slightly different question, “Bill, how do you deal with those exorcisms scenes in the Gospels?” Bill’s answer? “I usually just turn the page to the next story.” So there you have it, two highly educated professors of New Testament locking arms together in “fancy dancing.” You must be thinking about now, “Wow, I come to church to get answers and what do they serve up? Fancy dancing.” Sorry about that.

You see, the church has always had an ambiguous attitude toward stories of demon possession and exorcisms. More on that later. Nevertheless, we have these bewildering tales in living color

staring us in the face. Thirteen times in the New Testament you will find these words and phrases: “demoniac”, “possessed by a demon”, and “unclean spirit.” Paul would perform exorcisms throughout the Mediterranean world, which would have made him appear to be just another Jewish exorcist.

Jesus cast out demons or unclean spirits from people who exhibited various physical disorders: paralysis, epilepsy, inability to speak, blindness, curved spine, and one man who would foam at the mouth, grind his teeth and fall rigid on the ground. Others were freed from psychic disorders, like the man in the synagogue who kept crying out loudly, “What have you come to do to us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us?” Strangely enough, Jesus himself is often accused of being possessed by a demon.

Clearly the writers of the New Testament saw demons causing certain physical and psychic disorders. They viewed the world much as Martin Luther did, whose hymn “A Mighty Fortress” has this line: “And though this world with devils filled should threaten to undo us, we will not fear, for God hath willed His truth to triumph through us.”

That rather succinctly sums up the worldview of the New Testament writers. Their world was filled with devils, unclean spirits and demons, all subject to the prince of demons Beelzebub. The

Ephesian letter echoes that outlook, “Our spiritual struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, the authorities, the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places” (6:12).

And what is most terrifying about this worldview is the sheer randomness of demon possession. Demons seem to possess certain people NOT because they are worse than others, but out of sheer caprice. It is like being hit by a meteorite. Just ask the pigs in our story. The demoniacs are unsuspecting victims, as though lightning had struck them. The world was thus a place of great uncertainty, and “this world with devils filled” could undo anyone, anytime at anyplace.

That is why when Jesus casts out demons, there is never an attendant word of forgiveness. It is NOT as though the demon possessed were greater sinners than anyone else. Rather, they are victims of an assault, a spiritual invasion. And that is why Jesus “drives out” or “casts out” the demons; he does not “forgive them”. They are seen as invaders and usurpers. Thus, Jesus exerts his spiritual power over against them and expels them from their victims. Not as an act of forgiveness, but as an act of liberation.

Which brings us to our text in Luke 8. It's a story told in all three Synoptic Gospels. Matthew and Luke borrow from Mark and add their own contributions to this memorable tale. Luke tells us that Jesus and his friends got into a boat and land on the southeast corner of the Sea of Galilee, the Gentile land of the Gerasenes. How do we know this is Gentile country? Because they are raising pigs, an animal forbidden in the Jewish law.

So Jesus enters, in effect, into a foreign country, a hostile place. Why does he go there? One can only wonder if Jesus had heard tell of this poor man possessed by so many demons. This man was clearly deranged, wearing no clothes and living among the tombs, driven by the demons into this remote region by the lakeside. In fact, he was repeatedly bound with chains and fetters, which could not hold him/ A truly pitiable figure. Certainly, this possessed man was a clear and present danger to himself and to his neighbors.

Immediately upon seeing Jesus the man falls before him and cries out, "What have you to do with me, Jesus Son of the Most High God? I beseech you, do not torment me." In the Gospels the demons recognize Jesus' true identity before anyone else. And they fear him and his power over them. Jesus asks the man his name and he answers, 'Legion'. Learning his name, now Jesus has power over

him. So the demons beg not to be driven back into the abyss, the home for demons.

And then in one of the most surprising twists in all the Gospels- could anybody have seen this coming?-Jesus seems to grant the demons their wish. Instead of the abyss, the demons are cast out of the man and then invade a very large herd of swine. Now a Jewish audience would find this to be hilariously fitting-a legion of demons descending upon a herd of pigs. But the next part is not so funny. The possessed herd of pigs rush down a steep embankment and are drowned in the lake. For the Jewish mind, that is exactly what demons do-they destroy whatever they possess. Whether it is one's physical or psychic health or even one's life, demons are all about the destruction of God's good creation. Just as the Roman Legions would one day destroy Jerusalem.

Well, all this strikes fear and terror in the hearts of the pig farmers. When word gets back to the city, the Gerasenes come running out to see what has happened. They see the deranged man from the tombs now clothed and in his right mind, sitting at the feet of Jesus. They are simply astonished. But then they hear about the large herd of swine drowned in the lake. Right then and there they beg Jesus and his followers to get back in their boat and leave their

country. Surely, they must have been board members of the local Swine Herders Association!

Now the man who has come out of the tombs no doubt sees the reaction of his compatriots. So he begs to get into the boat with Jesus. But Jesus remarkably urges him to “return to your home and declare how much God has done for you.” Here there is no Messianic Secret, but a command to go tell it on the mountain and anywhere else it will be heard. And so this liberated man presumably goes into Gentile territory and tells the good news of Jesus’ life-giving power. He is now an evangelist and you wonder if his fellow Gerasenes would still think he is out of his mind. Who knows?

What a story! What are we to make of it? One thing we know is that some in the early church were clearly not so comfortable with these kinds of tales. Nowhere in the Gospel of John, for instance, does Jesus perform an exorcism. Does the writer of the Fourth Gospel feel some disquiet about such stories? In truth, this gospel begins a long line of Christians who truly don’t know what to make of demon possession and exorcisms. Like my friend Bill, the author of John seems to turn the page to the next story. What do you do with

these stories of demon possession-not only of people but of pigs?  
Let's talk.

One thing many have done with these stories is to put them back in the First Century and leave them there. A relic of the past like food offered to idols and Greek gods perched atop Mount Olympus. It just seems so long ago and far away. So we tuck these stories into some theological museum of antiquities. Yet, our text stands there, that demon possessed man freed and liberated on the lakeside, sitting there in his right mind before Jesus. And soon to be an evangelist for his home country. What to do with this story?

So for me, I still am not sure about the metaphysical status of the demonic. And I do not believe we should say that physical and psychic disorders are caused by demons. We now have other ways to diagnose and treat such conditions. So I would have us look at what this story tells us about Jesus and his ministry among those who suffered so many maladies.

I think these stories tell us that Jesus was willing to encounter people in their worst moments. Those suffering all kinds of conditions. Like the thief dying on a cross beside him. Or the lepers he touched. Or this pitiable man wandering in the tombs, breaking chains, crying out in despair, posing a danger to himself and others.

The Gerasene demoniac is humanity at its lowest point. Broken almost beyond recognition, humanity as it slips into nothingness.

This poor man reminds me of the condemned sitting on death row. For many years Sister Helen Prejean has ministered to these “dead men walking”. But why do that? Because our Gospel story suggests that no one is beyond the pale, no one is without hope, no one is impervious to Christ’s saving grace. No one, not ever.

Psalm 139 asks, “Whither shall I go from thy Spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence? If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.” Truly Jesus enters into our deepest darkness, however we landed there. He seeks us out in the oblivion into which we have plunged. There is no one beyond his compassion and there is no one he will pass by. He enters into the realm of the dead, where the hopeless and homeless and hapless dwell. He descends into our hell.

He comes with healing in his wings and with the power of his word. He does what only a Savior and a Liberator can do. He delivers us from evil. He utterly redeems our broken and battered lives. And makes us whole again, in our right minds. “He restores my soul.”

That is what I believe about Jesus our Lord. Call it exorcism. Call it the “expulsive power of a new affection”. Call it saving grace.



That is who Jesus is to me and who he has been for all damaged souls who “were lost but now are found, were blind but now they see.” And that is what he does for suffering humanity languishing “in the valley of the shadow of death.” That is who he wants to be for all of us.

So on this Lord’s Day, I give thanks for the amazing, liberating power of Jesus Christ to change lives, to change families, to change congregations, even to change the nations of the world. He is Lord and he is Savior. Our Redeemer and our Deliverer Thanks be to God for Christ Jesus who lives and reigns forever and ever. Amen.