

Pastor's Message – 6/19/2022  
Luke 8:26-39

Some of you are aware that I have been gone a couple Sundays: on the fifth for a recorder festival and this past Sunday for our Wisconsin Annual Conference. I haven't heard it in a while because either I'm on the bicycle on my way to church for Sunday worship or it's over by the time I get in the car, but this past Sunday, on my way to Green Bay, I had the chance to listen to the Sunday Puzzler on Wisconsin Public Radio. This past Sunday, the questions were about famous horror villains.

Like the player on the quiz, I don't like horror movies, I don't watch horror movies, so I didn't know many of the villains in the quiz. It's similar to our Bible reading for today. I don't really believe in demons and know little about demons, so, looking demons up on the internet, I found names of the most famous demons in movies. I had never heard of them and so they meant nothing to me.

I did discover in my research that **angel and demon**, demon also spelled **daemon**, respectively, are any **benevolent** or malevolent spiritual being that moves between the **heavenly** and earthly realms. So, if there are angels, there must also be demons. I'm not sure I believe that.

Throughout the history of religions, varying kinds and degrees of beliefs have existed in various spiritual beings, powers, and principles that transcend the realm of the sacred or holy—i.e., the transcendent realm—and the profane realm of time, space, and cause and effect. Such spiritual beings, when regarded as benevolent, are usually called angels in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, and those viewed as malevolent are termed demons.

The term *demon* is derived from the Greek word *daimōn*, which means a “supernatural being” or “spirit.” Though it has commonly been associated with an **evil** or malevolent spirit, the term originally meant a spiritual being that influenced a person's character. An *agathos daimōn* (“good spirit”), for example, was benevolent in its relationship to humans. The Greek philosopher Socrates, for example, spoke of his *daimōn* as a spirit that inspired him to seek and speak the truth. The term gradually was applied to the lower spirits of the supernatural realm who manipulated humans to perform actions that were harmful to their own or other's well-being. The dominant interpretation has leaned toward malevolence and that which forbodes evil, misfortune, and mischief.

I've never preached on this passage, have never been interested in this passage, but recent experiences in my life have drawn me to the story of the demoniac. Our society doesn't really know what to do with mental illness. I think most people are uncomfortable with mental illness: in others or in the potential threat to ourselves, for example, Alzheimer's and other forms of dementia. I've

mentioned to people that I can't imagine anything worse than not being able to trust my own brain: what is real and what is not.

But here it is in the Bible: a story about demons or mental illness. The story explores Jesus' encounter with a man filled with demons. Matthew (8:28-34) and Mark (5:1-20) each tell the story a bit differently, but all three describe a man in great distress. The man is naked, homeless, and consigned to living in the places of death. He is an outcast, deeply feared by his community.

I suspect that most of you don't have your Bibles open, but just prior to arriving in the land of the Gerasenes, Jesus stilled the storm, calming the disciples' fears (Luke 8:22-25). In the midst of the drenching storm, Jesus stills the winds and calms the waves. He asks the disciples, "Where is your faith?" The story is the mid-point in a trilogy that demonstrates Jesus' power -- power over the elements of nature, wind, and waves (8:22-25); power over the supernatural, the unclean spirits (8:26-39); power over disease and death (8:40-56).

Jesus and the Twelve have just crossed the Sea of Galilee upon which Jesus has stilled a storm and they come ashore in the land of the Gerasenes. In Luke's gospel, this is Jesus' first trip into gentile territory, and it underscores Luke's purpose in writing that the Gospel is meant not just for Jewish Christians but for all people.

No sooner does Jesus and his entourage set foot on dry land than they are confronted with a man who is out of control. He lives in the cemetery; he runs around naked; he hurts himself. Mark gives an even more vivid description but for Luke it is enough to simply show the man is uncontrolled, self-destructive, and non-rational.

Obviously, the guy is possessed by a demon. A person in control of their senses wouldn't choose to live this way. So, Jesus commands the demon to come out, but there's a problem. It's not just one demon but many. Asked his name, the demon replies, "Legion," which, using the Roman army as the source of the metaphor, would be loosely translated as about one to two thousand.

No sooner is Jesus out of the boat when he is greeted by the man's fearful cries: "What have you to do with me, Jesus, son of the Most High God? I beg you, do not torment me." The man is fearful -- despite recognizing Jesus' divinity, he is afraid Jesus has come only to continue the torture he has long experienced. The demons are also fearful -- they know what Jesus can do.

The man is nameless, known only by his condition. The demons have plagued him in body and soul, causing him to wound himself and wreak havoc in the neighborhood. He is the man parents tell their children to avoid at all costs. Afraid of his outrageous strength, the community had tried to contain him with chains and guards.

Yet containment will not work. Even when subdued by lock and key, the demons would manage to break the bonds and drive him into the wild. The community's strategy of containment has not worked.

Preaching about demons, considering actual and real demons, is problematic since we don't experience demons today as Jesus did in his time. Michael Rogness, Professor of Preaching and Professor Emeritus of Homiletics, Luther Seminary, St. Paul, Minnesota, suggests that the "demons" Jesus confronts have "three things in common: they cause self-destructive behavior in the victim, the victim feels trapped in that condition and they separate the victim from normal living in the family circle." Sound familiar? Don't many of us suffer from the same kind of snares and burdens? Doesn't our society have conditions like that we might label demons? What are those demons? What damage do they do? How can Jesus free us from them?

People suffer from demons in many different ways. Consider these statistics that indicate the kinds of demons that afflict many of our children today. Every day in the United States 2,500 children go through a divorce or marital separation, thirteen children commit suicide, sixteen children are murdered, 3,610 teenagers are assaulted, 630 are robbed, and eighty are raped.

In today's reading are we not unlike Legion -- individuals possessed by many demons. For some it could be alcohol and for others it could be credit cards. The list is really endless and none of us have only a single item recorded. We are all affected by the demons of our day. Older folks might remember duck and cover drills, but our children today are, unfortunately, more accustomed to lock-downs.

Psychologist Rollo May provides a bridge between this colorful story and our world when he suggests that the difference between our *daimons*, or natural urges, and the demonic possession is the experience when one of these normal urges gets out of balance and begins to dominate and distort our personality. A simple experience for many of us is the experience of anger. Anger is a natural part of our personality, but occasionally it dominates and distorts who we are. We even say, "I was just so angry that I lost my head."

In our day, we have become far more accustomed to attributing calamities and disorders to the forces of nature or to internal mental or emotional problems. The remedy is not exorcism but counseling or medication. The story of the Gerasene demoniac can be interpreted so that it speaks a word of assurance and hope to those for whom every day is a battle with depression, fear, anxiety, or compulsive behavior. It can be interpreted to offer a word of hope that there is an answer to the demons of our time and the name is Jesus. Human efforts at containment have not worked and will not work.

Pigs do fly, or so it seems. They at least dive off cliffs, signaling the potent authority of God in a changing world. When changes come to this community,

the people of the Gerasenes are invited to place their trust in the One who brings order out of chaos. They are called to let go of the fear that harbors suspicions about those who are different. With the disciples, they are called to a trusting faith.

Change is coming. Actually, it has already arrived. The time of God is already here. It seems that our response to the chaos around us may either be to let go of our fear and declare what God has done for us, or to retreat back to our strategies of containment, severing connections with those who are different and settling for something much less satisfying than the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Life restored. Imagine being possessed, maybe not by demons, but by fear or dread or anguish or loss or hate or judgment. How burdened one would feel; how weighed down. Now imagine that the whole of your community, your family, your friends have all abandoned you. It's so bad that they have chained you or straitjacketed you or institutionalized you. I wonder when I think about the possessed man in Gerasene how lonely and fearful he must have been; how he must have felt at the end of his rope and unable to do anything for himself. Jesus enters and the man proclaims, through his possession, the true nature of Jesus. I wonder how the disciples felt, hearing this man scream out that Jesus was the Son of the Most High God.

That is not for us to know, although Jesus is quick to quiet the man, quick to restore him to peace and mental health, quick to cure him. Whether the man was truly possessed or mentally ill, we will never know. What we do know is that the man is restored to well-being. He is healed. The other important part of the story is that the man proclaims to everyone what Jesus has done for him.

There's a lesson in there for each of us. Has Jesus made a change in your life, restored, or blessed you in some way? When is the last time you proclaimed the gifts you have received through faith? Maybe it's time to do that once again.

What can the Christian church do to release the children in our society from those demons? Luke ends the story by returning to a private dialogue shared between Jesus and the man he has healed. Now fully in his right mind, in his own mind, the man begs to be made a part of Jesus' team, to "be with him."

If we allow Jesus to approach us, as Legion did, we may experience the same exorcism. The higher power of God will cast out our demons. The new life will be for us a resurrection experience. And we too, unchained by the power of the grace of God, will be able to share with others what Jesus has done for us. As it is with AA, one alcoholic mentoring another, so it will be with us, one redeemed sinner witnessing to another.