

Casting Out Demons
Psalm 22:19–28; Luke 8:26–39
Sunday, June 19, 2022

Let us pray: May your word be spoken, Lord, and set us free from all that which holds power over us. For in you there is mercy and the power to redeem, in Christ. Amen.

We have just finished a six-month stretch of holy days, going all the way back to November with Advent, then Christmas, then Epiphany, the Baptism of Jesus, the Transfiguration of Jesus, Lent, Holy Week, Easter, Pentecost, the Ascension of Christ, and finally Trinity Sunday last week. This is meant to take us through the whole story of Christ – his birth, life, death, resurrection, and ascension. And now we are done with that, and we have entered another six-month period called Ordinary Time.

Ordinary doesn't just mean *plain* or *boring*. It refers to the *ordinal numbers* by which the weeks are counted – the first week of Ordinary Time, the second week, and so on. This is a season in which there are not any big holy days. Rather, we are focusing in this time on the life and teachings of Jesus. It is a time in which we are meant to *grow* in our faith, grow in our knowledge and love of Christ, hence the color green on our paraments and stoles that represents *growth*. Ordinary Time is also marked as the *season* of Pentecost, like you see in our bulletin. The idea is that this is a time when we are growing in the Spirit, growing in our understanding of what it means to follow Jesus Christ and to be Christ's church in all the ordinary days of our lives.

But our scripture reading for today is anything but ordinary. In fact, it's outright *strange*. Jesus healing a man possessed by demons, sending the demons into a herd of pigs that then runs down a steep hill and into a lake, where they drown. How does this strange story help *us* grow in our

understanding of what it means to follow Jesus and to be Christ's church? Because I would *bet* that most of us here today are not worried about demonic possession. Not something that's really on our radar on a day-to-day basis. We're worried about Covid and the price of gas, an uncertain economy, war in Ukraine, mass shootings, political divisiveness in our country and our families, and *how am I going to keep from going crazy this summer now that the kids are out of school*. We need to know how to follow Christ in *that* world. Just like the demons asked Jesus, "What have you to do with me," we're thinking, "What has this story to do with *us*?"

But this story actually hits a whole lot closer to home than we think. Theologian Michael Rogness says it this way, "Gospel stories of demon possession are difficult...because *we* don't experience demons as described in the Bible. However, all 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? If we define 'demons' as those forces which have captured us and prevented us from becoming what God intends us to be, we are as surrounded by – yes, *possessed* by – as many demons as those whom Jesus encountered. Our demons can be of many kinds: mental illnesses...addictions, obsessions, destructive habits, and so on."¹

There are *all kinds* of things that possess us, haunt us, keep us bound and shackled like the man in this story. Rogness names a few, but we are possessed, held captive by fear, anger, grudges, prejudices. Some of us are possessed by a spirit of *helplessness* with so much going on in our country and our world that feels so impossibly out of our control. We are haunted by the past, something that we have *done*, or something that has been done *to us* that we *just can't let go of*.

¹ <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-12-3/commentary-on-luke-826-39-3>

And addictions don't just have to do with drinking, smoking, or drugs. It can be *anything* that we do not think we can live without; that thing that makes us feel like we have some degree of control, when in reality *it* is controlling *us*. This story is not so foreign to our experience of the world and of life.

But there is *good news* here. First, God does not leave us alone. With all of the things that possess us and bind us and hold us captive and keep us from being the people that God created us to be, it's easy for us to get in the mindset of, "I'm not *worthy* of God. How could God possibly want anything to do with me? I'm a *failure*. I feel so *far away* from God. I don't even know if I *believe* in God." But God believes in *us*, and God does not leave us alone.

We see this in the psalm that we read earlier. This psalm is only part of a much larger psalm that we might be more familiar with. Because Psalm 22 starts off with the cry, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" The words that Christ cried on the cross. The psalmist goes on, "Why are you so far from helping me, for the words of my groaning? O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer, and by night, but find no rest...I am a worm and not human, scorned by others and despised by the people." It goes on and on talking about the problems and the suffering that this person is experiencing. This is the cry of a person who feels *abandoned* by God; given over to evil and forces that they cannot control. I can imagine that the man Jesus encountered could resonate with this psalm. I can imagine there are times when a lot of *us* could resonate with this psalm.

By the time we get to the section that we read today, the psalmist is still going on about the problems they are facing. "O Lord, do not be far away! O my help, come quickly to my aid! Deliver my soul from the sword, my life from the power of the dog! Save me from the mouth of

the lion!” Verse after verse, crying out to God, “Help me! Save me!” And then there is a sudden shift. So sudden that we might not even have noticed it. It goes from saying, “Save me from the mouth of the lion,” to, “From the horns of the wild oxen, you have rescued me.” We don’t know exactly what happened, but something has *changed*. Salvation has come! God, who the psalmist felt was so far away, has *not* given them up to the power of evil. It says, “You did not hide your face from me, but heard when I cried to you.” God did *not* leave them alone. God has *rescued* them and set them free from all that which had a hold on them.

We see it in Jesus’ story, too. This demon-possessed man “is not asking for help. He is not asking for healing. He is asking Jesus to *leave him alone*.”² “What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I beg you, do not torment me!” Have you ever known someone who feels so far gone, so defeated by addiction or mental illness or *physical* illness or despair that they just say, “Just leave me alone. I don’t *want* your help. I *can’t* be helped.”

But Jesus does not leave us alone. Jesus did not leave this demon-possessed man alone, even though he told him to, and Jesus does not leave *us*, give *us* over to the power of sickness and addiction and evil and forces beyond our control. Jesus *persists*. Christ is *relentless* in his pursuit of us, his love for us. Like the parent who cannot give up on the child who struggles with addiction or whatever else and keeps making the same mistakes over and over again, Jesus does not give up on *us*, his beloved children. We are never too far gone for Jesus to rescue us, and no matter how hard we *resist*, no matter how hard we push him and others away, he does not leave us alone in our suffering and distress.

² <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-12-3/commentary-on-luke-826-39-2>

A funny thing about this story is that the demons beg Jesus not to send them “back into the abyss.” One biblical scholar describes the abyss as, “the depth of the sea, under the earth, the primeval world of gloom and darkness, the bottomless pit where demonic powers are confined by God,”³ and all throughout the Old Testament, it talks about the abyss as, “the depths of the sea.” So the demons leave the man and enter into the pigs, which then rush down the hillside, right into the lake, where they drown in the depths of the sea. They beg Jesus not to send them back to the abyss, and Jesus sends them back to the abyss.

Which is to say that Christ has ultimate *power*, even over the unclean spirits. There is a story in Mark’s gospel where Jesus heals another demon-possessed man, and everyone who sees it is amazed, and they say, “He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him!”⁴ Pastor Judith Jones says that this story “reveals Jesus as one with cosmic authority to free people from the forces that possess and control us. He has sovereignty over all the powers that destroy human life. Jesus comes to challenge and cast out every power that prevents us from living fully and freely as human beings created in God’s image.”⁵ This story points to the ultimate victory of God over all the powers that enslave human life.⁶

Christ has the power to heal *addictions*; I have *seen* it. Christ has the power to heal *relationships*; I have *seen* it. Christ has the power to heal *prejudices*; I have *seen* it. Christ has the power to heal mental and physical illness; I can’t *explain* it, but I have *seen* it. Christ has the power to bring *peace* in the midst of paralyzing fear; I have *experienced* it. Not only does Christ not leave us alone, but he has the power to heal us and set us free from all that which possesses us.

³ Eugene Boring & Fred Craddock, *The People’s New Testament Commentary*, pg. 210

⁴ Mark 1:27

⁵ <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-12-3/commentary-on-luke-826-39-4> (paraphrased)

⁶ Eugene Boring & Fred Craddock, *The People’s New Testament Commentary*, pg. 210

Now, that healing might not look like we *expect*. No one expected this demon-possessed man to be healed by the demons going into the pigs that ran down into the lake and drowned. That was unexpected, but it was his path to healing. The person struggling with addiction might not expect to end up in a hospital or jail. But that might be their path to healing. I didn't expect to end up on a three-month medical leave back in November, but it was my path to healing.

Like this man's healing which resulted in the death of those pigs which *belonged* to someone and cost them their livelihood, our path to healing might cost us *everything*. It might cost us the life that we are comfortable and familiar with. That's why sometimes we *protect* our addictions, or we don't *seek* the help we need, because we're *scared*, and we can't imagine a life beyond the one that we're currently living, no matter how untenable it is. But there *is* a better life. Christ comes to us with healing in his hands, and as Paul says, "The sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing to the glory about to be revealed to us." And we can *live* in that glory, not just one day after we die, but *here, now*.

New life is possible. And it doesn't cost us anything to *get* it. We just cry out to God. Whether out of desperation, faith, or fear, we cry out to God. Like the psalmist cried out to God, like this demon-possessed man cried out to Christ, *we* can cry out to Jesus for the healing we need. That healing might not look like we *expect* or even *want*, but it will be the healing that we *need*.

And all we are asked to do in response is tell others the good news of what God has done for us. Sometimes that's the hardest part, the *scariest* part – telling other people about the healing that Christ has brought us. Because we don't want to seem weird or crazy or fanatical. I did not want to share the story of *my* healing with you on Easter Sunday. I *really* didn't. Because it was

deeply personal, and I knew I risked being misunderstood or thought to be crazy. But after Jesus heals this man, he tells him to return to his home and declare how much God has done for him. The psalmist, after experiencing God's salvation, says, "I will tell of your name to my brothers and sisters; in the midst of the congregation, I will praise you." He goes and tells others what God has done for him.

When we experience Christ's liberating healing from whatever it is that has possessed us, we are called to tell others how much Jesus has done for us, so that as the psalmist says, "The ends of the earth shall remember and turn to the Lord, and all the families of the nations shall worship before him. For dominion belongs to the Lord, and God rules over the nations." Cry out to God for the healing you need, and then cry out to others, declaring how much God has done for you, in the name of Jesus. Amen.