

EXORCISM

The Reverend Peter F. Walsh
June 20, 2010, Trinity Sunday

I love this Gospel story of the Gerasene demonic, and it is totally shocking, and, if we don't hear it that way we are not listening. It is a complete affront to our expensive educations and to the scientific method of knowledge and to the way many of us have deconstructed and re-constructed our cosmic view of how the world works.

Recent surveys have shown that Episcopalians are the most educated denomination in the U.S., and now we have a story of a naked man in chains freaking out in a graveyard possessed by demons and exorcism and a herd of swine committing suicide.

What could be better on a Sunday morning? Who says the Bible is boring. This is way better than *The New York Post*. Many people don't know what to do with this story of an artifact of antiquity or a crazy story way to tell the profound truth that Jesus has power over bad stuff; and many of us lean away from this story as one that does not have much to do with our own lives. But maybe, just maybe, this is exactly the type of story we should lean into. Maybe there is a lot for us to learn from the story of the Gerasene demonic, even if it does not fit our world view – perhaps exactly because it does not fit our world view. Let's look at this. We have a man possessed by demons.

Let's have a quick, "Demons 101". What are demons? All cultures have demons as a

personified form of bad. They are all over the Old Testament and there are even more in the New Testament. Demons are evil by nature, and they subject to Satan and are here to deceive and torment and cause internal and external chaos.

Now in the Yogic tradition they believe that demons are disembodied and disturbed souls with evil karma. These are the souls of people who did bad stuff. And for these folks their post-bodily life means that they are stuck in a hellish existence living in spiritual darkness, outside the light of God.

Now much of the tradition has it that demons have names and are personal. Demons are not like a cloud, smog or spiritual pollution in Los Angeles. Some of you may remember the C.S. Lewis' book *The Screwtape Letters*. You might remember this whole conversation between "Screwtape" and "Wormwood". Now Jesus comes upon this man and asks the possessed man his name. and his response is my name is Legion. He has this legion of many demons. And when Legion speaks it is the demons speaking through the man. And they also remember that a legion is a Roman battle group of four to six thousand soldiers.

Now demons seek a human home, body or psyche. A human home to make themselves manifest. They are like parasites; they feed off living beings in order that they may live. They take unlawful possession of people's spirits.

Those of you who are Harry Potter fans may remember in the first book where the evil psychic remains of Lord Voltemort take over Professor Quirrel's body so that Lord Voltemort can manipulate himself back to evil life. Now the result of demonic possession is that we catch it like a virus. Look at the man in the story. He is naked and lives in a graveyard under guard, he has shackles and chains. Except that when the demonic evil gets into him, he then breaks his chains and he runs "into the wilds". Do you get it...it is all landscapes of fear.

A great book written 20 years ago is called *Landscapes of Fear*, the place that we fear. The wilds, the woods, the wilderness that Jesus goes into. This is not a trip down the Appalachian Trail. It's a bad place; the demon lives in a graveyard, in the tombs. And his whole inner life is in the wilds. His whole inner life is out of control. He is living a nightmare. Jesus comes across the lake and steps out of the boat and look what happens. The demons know Jesus immediately and they call him "Son of the most high God". You have to realize that often times the disciples do not know who Jesus is but the demons know. They bow before his authority and physically and spiritually, immediately they fall down before his feet and then they panic. They start shouting through this man, the demon, and beg Jesus.

Now look at the exorcism. The exorcism is the exact opposite of demonic behavior. Jesus simply commanded the unclean spirit to come out of the man. It is matter-of-fact, it is calm, in control, no struggle, no violence, no magical words, no Hollywood exorcist movie with crucifixes and holy water and, no, there is also no doubt that Jesus is the boss, and no doubt he will win.

The demons know they are going to lose. They know this immediately. And so they begin to negotiate. It's like with kids. They know they are going to lose but they want to

get something out of the deal. Three times the demons beg Jesus. They beg that they do not want to be tormented. That is ironic and pathetic because it is their business to torment. And now they cannot take their own medicine. And they beg that they do not get sent back to the darkness or roam without consciousness.

Yogi wrote about it this way, "In the oceanic depths of black space where they were trammelled in the torments of their own visions of a nightmarish existence without the light of God to guide them. They feared being denied a further joy ride in the fleshy vehicle, and being thrown back into Hades and a nightmare of dark subconscious existence, the deep." They do not want to get thrown back where they belong.

Now look at the results of the Exorcism for the Demons. They win the negotiation and still lose. Jesus agrees to let them enter the swine but they lose in the end. The swine go out of their minds and dramatically drown themselves returning the demons to where they belong which is the deep, the dark, Hades. The place where there is no light of God.

Now look at the man who was possessed by the demons. What is the result of the exorcism? He is sitting at the feet of Jesus clothed in his right mind. He is healed. And after he is healed he wants to follow Jesus. Jesus is the man. Now Jesus doesn't let him follow, he sends him home. Remember apostle means to be sent out. Jesus makes him an apostle. He sends him out, he sends him to his home so that he might be a living witness to the power of God. This man bears witness to Christ and he declares how much Jesus has done for him. So that the Gospel writer Luke wrote that Jesus is the fullness and completeness of the power of God.

Now let us look at the results and reactions of the people who come out to see what

happened in the miraculous healing. Well, in many perspectives they have the exact opposite reaction than they should. They come out and are seized with a great fear. They send Jesus away. They send away the one man who can really help them. They should have asked him to stay. Now let us pause for a minute. This is an amazing family insight theory. Which is why, if you are part of a crazy family scenario and, often times in a family, help is offered to a person in trouble, but they are afraid to accept the help offered. There is a system breakdown. They would rather keep going the way they are because they know it.

Now let us look at Jesus. Jesus is sent away. No ego whatsoever. Jesus takes no credit for what just happened. Only thing he says is tell people what Jesus has done for you. Jesus is a total gentleman. There is no whining or fussing, no sales pitch and no grandstanding. He gets in the boat and returns.

Now let's look at our own lives. I ask you, are we ever the New Canaan demoniac? Did you ever wake up in the middle of the night and feel attacked by your problems at about three o'clock in the morning? Your own bed becomes a landscape of fear where you are disturbed and despondent and in a very dark place even though it is not the darkness around you. Your problems become disproportionately huge and you are sure you are going down the proverbial tubes. I call this being attacked by demons.

Did you ever see someone and ever love someone who got to a particular place in their life, and they looked horrible. It seems as though there is no blood in their skin, as though they have been living in a dark hole and have seen no light. Where there lives are spiraling out of control and they are not living into the fullness of their life. I call this being attacked by demons.

Now whether our demons grow out of our own neurosis, our bad habits, our addictions, or relationships with dysfunctional people and people with bad karma, or some darker place, most of us are periodically possessed by our own demons. The result is always the same. It is always disturbing. It is always causing internal chaos and sometimes outward chaos in our lives. And when we are feeling attacked by our demons, we cannot live to give for the love of the Lord as our vision says, because we cannot even stand to live in our own skin.

It is horrible. So what are we to do? The whole Gospel points that we need to turn to Jesus who has power over all this bad stuff. He is the one man who can help us. But we turn away from Jesus who has the power.

Maybe what we all need is this. We need a private, quiet, prayerful, self-exorcism. But to do this, first things first, is to get over the word exorcism. We need to stop thinking of it in terms of the 70's movie where there was a great spiritual wildness, Hollywood-style, and all kinds of freaking out and petrifying.

Second, we must understand exorcism as a form of healing prayer. Here I am greatly helped in my advice by Avery Brooke. She is an Episcopalian who lives in Darien and is a powerful, prayerful, spiritual teacher. We have her books in our bookstore. She is a leader of many spiritual retreats and conferences. She went to Berkeley Divinity School and has since had a terrible stroke. I read her writing recently and she points out in a healing prayer: we ask the healing power of Jesus to come into a person and to make us well. It part of the prayers of the people.

But she says that in a healing exorcism, it goes like this: we command in the name of Jesus that whatever the bad spirit, that demon, to leave, to go. We take control and demand that Jesus take control. We send that spirit to Jesus. And Jesus will decide where it is to go.

The man in the Gerasene demonic is sitting at the feet of Jesus, clothed in his right mind. Is that not what we all want, particularly when we are feeling out of our mind? But there is more. We need to get in touch with the meaning and mission of our lives. He becomes a disciple of Jesus Christ. He is then sent to his home to be a living witness to the power of God in his life. To be an instrument of God's peace to live to give for the love of the Lord.

We Got the Power, too. Jesus won the ultimate victory over Satan and all the spiritual forces that seek to corrupt and destroy the creatures of God.

At our baptism we were given the power to call upon Jesus in profound ways.

It takes all the spiritual tools to live a healthy spiritual life. The victory is ours.

Sometimes when our own demons attack, we can call upon the name of Jesus and he can win again that victory for us, and, for a season or a day or a night or a month or maybe forever, we can be sitting at his feet clothed in our right mind, too.

Amen.