

## **Demons.**

Luke 8:26-39

The Fifth Sunday after Pentecost

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Stories of demon possession—like the one we just heard in today’s gospel—can be difficult to preach, because most of us here today don’t *experience* demons as described in the Bible. It’s true, right? If most of you heard a co-worker or classmate talking about being possessed by a demon or of having an demon chased out of them, you’d probably either look at them like they were crazy, or else you’d be a little scared.

I was more than a little scared **and** I wondered if my colleague was crazy back when I was on my internship more than twenty years ago. I was in intern pastor in Tanzania, working at a church secondary school called the Lutheran Junior Seminary in Morogoro. In addition to my on-campus duties, my supervisor and I were in charge of outreach to remote village churches that didn’t have any pastor, so once a month or so we’d load up a school van with one of the choirs and head off to lead worship way out in the bush. One of these village churches was so remote that a pastor only got there once or twice in a year, which meant that when we DID get there, there was a whole backlog of pastoral acts to perform; think of it as a sacramental road show.... The time I was there, we were to do a regular service with communion, plus confirmation, the blessing of civil marriages, reception of new members, and about a dozen baptisms. So as Pastor Sanga and I went down this long line of people waiting to be baptized, we got to one woman and no sooner had the one drop of water hit her head, long before the Pastor could say “In the name of the Father,” let alone the Son or Holy Spirit, she started shouting, crying, jumping up and down, and finally rolling on the floor. Pastor Sanga calmly called over the church elders who took her outside for some air, gave her some water, generally calmed her down. We finished the baptisms, and as the choir began its next anthem, I whispered to Pastor Sanga, what do we do now? He said, like it was the most obvious and

natural thing ever, “After the service, we’ll have to do an exorcism.” Oh, yeah. Of course, I thought. We’ll just do an exorcism.

So this was insight number one: while *I* might not think of or experience demons as described in the Bible, maybe people in Tanzania do. Maybe even Christians, even Christian leaders in Tanzania (and elsewhere in Africa, Asia, the Mideast and other places) are more at home with the biblical notion of demons than we North American Christians are. While we may not realize it, we may not use this specific language to describe it, demons—legions of demons—are in fact alive and well in our world today.

If you remember how the gospel story describes the demons that possessed the man in the story today, they basically did three things to him. 1) They caused him to hurt himself and to be a threat to others. 2) They cut him off from his family, from his community, any sense of normal life with others. 3) They took him over, they ruled over him. His demons were legion—that is, they were so many they could not be counted or named. They were like a foreign armed invading force, they *occupied* this man. He was powerless over them.

I think that if we focus on this description, this definition of demons, rather than thinking so much on the supernatural “evil spirits” realm of things, I wonder if we can begin to relate a bit more—even as the logical, rational, no nonsense people we imagine ourselves to be. Based on that description, many of us, maybe even **all** of us have demons we struggle with.

The demons are real. They are legion. And they are powerful.

They are individual demons like addictions, toxic interactions, abusive relationships, overwhelming grief. Demons that we know to have been present in our lives, causing us harm, keeping us from community, and taking up residence in our lives to the point where we are no longer in control. Demons we

try to confront on our own or in groups—demons confronted, for example by twelve-step programs or our own Celebrate Recovery.

The demons are real, they are legion, and they have power. They are collective demons whose consequences we have witnessed so vividly in the past few weeks—and but also months and years ago. Demons like systemic racism, as one city after the next in our country dealt with shootings of unarmed young black men at the hands of police, so entrenched that backlash is felt far and near from simply proclaiming that Black Lives Matter. Demons like homophobia or hetero-normalcy, which allowed several news cycles to focus on the perceived yet statistically unproven “danger” of a transgender person preying upon others simply because they have chosen to use the bathroom of their gender identity. We’ve seen the unveiling of the Demon of toxic male dominance leading to what could be described as Rape Culture in our society, embedded in a society and a legal system which continues to blame victims for sexual assault, while more or less letting a rapist off the hook because he is from a well-off family, at a prestigious university, and happens to be a pretty good athlete. They are demons our irrational love affair with handguns and assault weapons in this country—elevating the right to their possession and easy access well above other rights we hold to be inalienable, to the point where legally obtained firearms have been used in mass shootings occurring in elementary schools, college campuses, workplace Christmas parties, nightclubs who dared to openly celebrate Gay pride, and yes, even churches during bible studies. They are demons like our tendency to continually divide our world into “us and them,” Jew and Greek, Black and White, Christian, Muslim and Jew, Gay and Straight, divisions that too often, as our presiding bishop reminded us, have led to us first “othering” people, then demonizing them. And yes, in the midst of that dividing and othering and demonization of people created in God’s image, there is the continuing presence of the demon of Islamophobia, which allows us

to rush to judgment and seek revenge well before all the facts are in—based simply on somebody's name.

The demons are real, they are legion, and they are powerful. Their simple existence causes us to harm ourselves and be a threat to others. Their presence in our world keeps us from true community, dividing us up into ever-smaller groups of like-minded people, unable to see the humanity of others not fully like us. They occupy our lives, invade our being, take us residence in our society.

The demons are real, they are legion, and they have power. But they are not all-powerful. Jesus models for us a way to name these demons that haunt us, to begin to take away their power, to loosen their grip simply by admitting their existence. Jesus calls us to name these demons so that in naming them, in becoming aware of them, we can begin to face up to them, we can begin to sort out how to get rid of them.

So, back to Tanzania—back to that exorcism Pastor Sanga and I were going to perform after the service. I spent the rest of the service worrying about it. I mean, I was a 27-year-old theology student from Berkeley, California—what did I know about exorcisms? Pastor Sanga said again, after the service, we will simply ask God to drive this demon out of this woman, so that she could get on with her life. So when the service finally ended, we went to where the woman was waiting with one of the church elders. Pastor Sanga sat down and simply asked her: what's going on? Have you been preparing for baptism for a long time? What does your family think about your becoming a Christian? Each time the woman answered, sharing the difficulties she had had leaving her traditional religion to become a Christian. I kept wondering, where are we going to do the exorcism, when is Pastor Sanga going to chase out the demon, when I realized this WAS the exorcism. It seemed to me more like a pastoral counseling session, like an intervention, maybe. It was not what I was expecting. But it seemed to be working. The woman was calmer. She realized she still had some more work to

do to be ready to accept the new life that would come with baptism. She agreed to meet weekly with the elders, for them to pray with her and for her, to study the bible with her. She agreed to meet with the Pastor again when he came back. She hoped to work through all of this and to try again to be baptized next time—maybe six months later. By then, she hoped that God would have helped her chase away all her demons.

And we were done. We were done with the exorcism. Eventually, I found out that she as indeed baptized and took up her place in that community, like the man in the gospel, who was later seen, clothed and in his right mind—a full member of the congregation. And the last word for that woman, or for any of us confronted with our demons, delivered of them by whatever method by the grace and mercy of Jesus Christ, that last word could just as well have been Jesus' final line from the gospel: "Return to your home, and declare how much God has done for you."

The demons are real, they are legion, and they are powerful; but they are not **all**-powerful.

We have been challenged to confront the demons that are among us in the world today. But we are not left without a hope and a promise of HOW to face up to these very real demons. In Jesus Christ, through the power of the Holy Spirit we can name these demons for what they are, we can confront them, we can call them out, and finally, we can be rid of them by the Grace of God. Freed, healed, and released, we, can be like that man in our gospel story: restored to our right mind, no longer harming self or others, restored to community, and from that place of freedom, healing, release, and restoration, we too can tell everyone we meet just what Jesus has done for us. Amen.