

“Exorcism”
June 21, 2020
St. Paul’s UCC Church
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Mark 5:1-17

They [Jesus and the disciples] came to the other side of the sea, to the country of the Gerasenes. And when Jesus had stepped out of the boat, immediately a man out of the tombs with an unclean spirit met him. He lived among the tombs; and no one could restrain him any more, even with a chain; for he had often been restrained with shackles and chains, but the chains he wrenched apart, and the shackles he broke in pieces; and no one had the strength to subdue him. Night and day among the tombs and on the mountains he was always howling and bruising himself with stones. When he saw Jesus from a distance, he ran and bowed down before him; and he shouted at the top of his voice, “What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I adjure you by God, do not torment me.” For he had said to him, “Come out of the man, you unclean spirit!” Then Jesus asked him, “What is your name?” He replied, “My name is Legion; for we are many.” He begged him earnestly not to send them out of the country. Now there on the hillside a great herd of swine was feeding; and the unclean spirits begged him, “Send us into the swine; let us enter them.” So he gave them permission. And the unclean spirits came out and entered the swine; and the herd, numbering about two thousand, rushed down the steep bank into the sea, and were drowned in the sea.

The swineherds ran off and told it in the city and in the country. Then people came to see what it was that had happened. They came to Jesus and saw the demoniac sitting there, clothed and in his right mind, the very man who had had the legion; and they were afraid. Those who had seen what had happened to the demoniac and to the swine reported it. Then they began to beg Jesus to leave their neighborhood.

Welcome once again to our summer preaching series, “Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith”! Many of you know by now that I am basing this series on the wonderful book of the same name by Kathleen Norris, one of the most thoughtful and prayerful writers I know.

In her book, Norris takes so-called “churchy words” (like salvation, or incarnation) – words that many of us may have grown up with if we were church goers – and begins to imagine these words in fresh, new ways.

So that’s what I would like to do during the summer with you all. I’m going to pick some of my favorite words from Norris’ book, and explore with you how we might start to hear some of these words as if we, too, are encountering them as if for the first time.

Last week, we looked together at the word “incarnation.” Incarnation: “holiness is near.” We began to look for holiness in the most ordinary things in life. God showing up in the most run-of-the-mill situations. Holiness is near.

That was last week.

This week, our word is “exorcism.”

Exorcism. *Shudder.* Kind of a scary word, at least at first rub. And admittedly, this is a word that our particular church probably *doesn't* throw around willy-nilly as much as we do other words. But still, "exorcism" is a pretty loaded word.

For me, when I hear the word "exorcism," I immediately think of the movie *The Exorcist*, which is a horror film about a young girl who is possessed by a demon. The movie scared the pants off me when I saw it, and probably still would.

But honestly, I don't think there's a lot in that movie that applies to my everyday life. It's too dramatic, too fantastical. Easy to dismiss it and say, "Hmph. Demons have nothing to do with me."

Even the story from Mark's Gospel, our scripture for today about a man possessed by an "unclean spirit," is kind of easy to shove aside, and say, "Oh, that would never be me." I mean, this guy that Jesus and the disciples encounter is really far gone: he lives among the tombs, he's wearing shackles and chains, he's always hitting and bruising himself... so extreme! Easy to write off this guy as nothing like me, nothing like you, at all.

When I was in seminary, I lived for part of a summer in Sacramento, CA, where I worked with folks who were recovering from addictions – mostly drugs and alcohol. I became close with this woman named Sherri who once told me the story of her "rock bottom": the terrible, often near-death point in an addict's lives in which – because things are so bad – she or he may finally turn around and start to get sober. Sherri told me she was homeless at the time, and this particular day, was tripping something awful. She was hearing all these voices, demonic voices, she told me, that were whispering to her: "Go ahead. Do it. Take your own life. Nobody will miss you. Nobody will even notice. You're worthless. You're a piece of crap. You are unlovable. You are a monster."

I was 23-years old at the time, totally naïve. Wide-eyed, I asked her, "But... who were the demons?"

Sherri sighed, probably rolled her eyes, and replied with not a little bit of exasperation in her voice, "They were *me*, Mary Beth. The demons were me."

But again, kind of an extreme story from my friend Sherri. One involving homelessness, alcohol, and hard drugs. Again, easy to distance ourselves from her story. Easy to say: But that's not me.

A lot of y'all know how much I love monks and nuns, and monastic life in general, and so I'd like to share some of their wisdom. This may help us go beyond thinking about demons in these very dramatic and extreme terms.

There's another story that goes like this: Once upon a time, many centuries ago, a novice monk asked an older, well-respected monk named Abba Poemen, "How do the demons fight against me?" Well, the wise Abba Poemen replied, "The demons will never fight against you, as long as you are doing your own will." He continued, "It is only when you begin to resist and question yourself – it is only when you start to seek another, better, more Godly way of life – that the struggles begin. You see," Abba Poemen patiently explained to the other monk, "It is our own wills that become the demons, and it is these that attack us."¹

¹ Norris, Kathleen, *Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith* (Riverhead Books, New York, 1998), p. 46.

It is our own wills that become the demons, and it is these that attack us. What if demonic forces are not outside forces at all, but are just my self-will run riot? What if demons are not *out there*, but *in here*: my own internal selfish and fearful desires, desires that, left unchecked, can wreak havoc upon myself and upon those around me?

What are the things that possess you? That slowly eat away at you, and cause strain and rupture with those around you? Is it your resentments? Your anger? Your greed? Is it jealousy?

There's that one near and dear to my heart, one I've preached about recently: perfectionism. This is an aspect of myself that, left unchecked, can majorly start to run the show. Perfectionism is something that can overtake me, that can cause me to forget about my dependence on God and other people, and instead lure me into believing that it's my own good works that will save me. A demon? Yes, I think it is. A subtle, sly, cunning one, one I hardly notice at all.

In the spirit of confession, I'd like to share something else I struggle with, church. Another addiction. Another demon, I would even go so far to say. And it is this: I am addicted to being comfortable.

I've started seeing this demon a lot in light of all the hard conversations about race I'm starting to have with friends, colleagues, you. And here's what I'm seeing: as a white person, I believe it is my right to be comfortable. As a white person, I expect Black and Brown people to *make* me comfortable, to not tell me things that I don't want to hear or show me things that I don't want to see. And these days, more than ever, Black and Brown people are saying to me that to be in their bodies means to feel unsafe all the time. To be Black or Brown means to be afraid to drive, to walk, to put your hands in your pockets, to look at someone a certain way. And you know what, church? I'd rather not hear that. It makes me uncomfortable. So I'd rather not know. I'd rather just go along and get along, in my nice, safe, white-washed, privileged world – comfortable and at ease.

And church: I am going to boldly claim that this is nothing less than a demon at work in me.

So, I've talked a lot about demons, or demonic forces, and tried to expand the definition to mean not the things outside myself, but the things that live inside me: my own self-will run riot, those things that block me from loving God and loving neighbor.

But, until now, I haven't actually talked much about the word of the day itself, which is, of course, "exorcism."

Exorcising the demons is the act in which whatever is haunting us, possessing us, is expelled, is sent away, is no more.

At the end of the story from Mark's gospel, Jesus exorcises, or expels, the possessed man's demons. With just a few words from the Son of God, the demons jump from the man into some nearby swine. Gone!

Yay! ...Right?

Not so much. Did you notice the people's reactions to the man who is now no longer possessed? Mark writes, "They came to Jesus and saw the demoniac sitting there, clothed and in his right mind, the very man who had had the legion; and they were afraid.... Then they began to beg Jesus to leave their neighborhood."

They were *afraid*?? Really?? And they want Jesus to leave the neighborhood? Shouldn't they be rejoicing? Celebrating? Having a party to welcome the formally-possessed man home?

Not so much. Being exorcised of our demons does not always lead to rejoicing. Quite the opposite. We see this in alcoholic families all the time. Someone stops drinking, and the whole family system crumbles. So much has been built around this addiction, this demon, that families don't know what to do with the newly-sober member now. Sure, the addiction, the demon, was bad... but at least it was familiar. At least we knew what to do with it.

I imagine that my demon – the one that tells me that my comfort is more important than all else – I imagine I will have lots of blow-back from naming this as something I want gone. I'll probably have blow-back and resistance from myself – as I fight myself about it – *and* from those around me. “What's wrong with wanting to be comfortable, Mary Beth? Haven't you worked hard and done good things to deserve it?” The resistance is real, and palpable, and I feel it even now.

But friends, thanks be to God, despite all that inevitable resistance, something is breaking through my thick skull, something is getting through to my white body. Thanks be to God, Jesus has showed up in my life in a new way, is working on me, and is longing to exorcise this demon of white comfort out of me.

For me, this process has just begun. Because this demon has burrowed itself deeply, the process is painful, and will take time. And it's *so very uncomfortable*. But Jesus didn't give up on the man possessed two thousand years ago, and Jesus is not giving up on me.

What about you, church? What are your demons? And what if Jesus is showing up for you too, right here, right now, speaking, “Come out, you unclean spirits!” What if Jesus is stubbornly sticking around, not giving up on you, until they're gone?

Thanks be to God.