

Pentecost 5C (6/19/2016)

Isaiah 65:1-9

Psalm 22:19-28

Galatians 3:23-29

Luke 8:26-39

The influence of “demons” in our world is unmistakable. We are assaulted on every side – driven to and fro – by their destructive power. They threaten to undermine our humanity and our hope. But, Jesus demonstrates a superior power, confronting them and casting them out. He clothes us with mercy, and restores us to life together.

5,600 demons. That’s the meaning of the strange response the tormented soul gives Jesus in our Gospel from Luke today. The instant Jesus sets foot on the land of the Gerasenes, a Gentile territory across the sea from Galilee, he is accosted by a man wracked with demons. “What is your name?” Jesus asks. And he replies, “Legion.” A legion was a Roman military detachment of 5,600 soldiers,¹ a frighteningly overwhelming number. The man’s name is Legion, that is, he no longer possesses an identity apart from the 5,600 demons that possess him. Demonic possession and exorcism are not unique to this story, but nowhere else in scripture do we find such a multiplicity of evil spirits oppressing one person; nowhere else do we find such a tragic and complete instance of madness and marginalization. Under the influence of 5,600 demons, the Gerasene demoniac is naked, raving, and roaming among the tombs. He is barely human.²

This story may seem implausible to the rationalists among us. We may no longer acknowledge the existence of evil spirits, as Luke’s original audience would have. Indeed, many efforts have been made to recast stories of demonic possession

¹ Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, 339.

² See David J. Lose, in *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Vol. 3, 169.

in terms we can understand, such as mental illness. But, no matter how we make sense of “demons,” we cannot question their reality. This past week has been a heartrending reminder that the influence of demons in our world is unmistakable. We are assaulted on every side – driven to and fro – by their destructive power. 5,600 demons. These are “the various guises through which the presence of evil is evident,” and by which people are excluded from “the experience of salvation,”³ to borrow one interpreter’s definition.

If we open our ears, we can hear their individual taunts. Do you hear the voice whispering in the ear of a lonely and desperate man, convincing him that killing is his final purpose? That’s a demon. Do you hear the voice of deep-seated homophobia, insisting that difference is a reason for violent hatred? That’s a demon. Do you hear the voice of self-loathing, preventing a person from accepting his full identity? That’s a demon.

Now, do you hear the voice of religious hostility, demeaning the faith of 1.7 billion people in the name of security or nationalism? That’s a demon. Do you hear the voice of persistent distrust, drawing us farther and farther away from our neighbors? That’s a demon. Do you hear the voice of despair, deflating our hope and undermining our resolve to make the world a more connected, more thriving place to live? That’s a demon.

Now, do you hear the voice of shame, telling you over and over again that you are not good enough, you are not beautiful or successful enough, you are not worthy of love? That’s a demon. Do you hear the voice of apprehension, keeping you from

³ Green 315.

speaking out or reaching out for fear of being rejected by others? That's a demon. Do you hear the voice of resignation, yielding to the suspicion that "life is short and then you die"? That's a demon.

Now, do you hear the voice of Jesus? When he steps out of the boat onto the land of the Gerasenes, he steps into the last place we would expect him to be.⁴ In a Gentile country overrun with unclean people and animals, and in the immediate vicinity of a tormented lunatic living among the dead – this is no place for a godly man. Yet, there is no distance, not even the breadth of the sea, that Jesus will not go to be right there. **In the face of hopeless circumstances – in the depth of suffering and helplessness – Jesus is present to bear the hope of healing and new life. This is the meaning of the incarnation, that God is with us – Immanuel – even at our worst.**

And, although 5,600 demons wield tremendous power to tear a man from his humanity and his community, Jesus demonstrates a superior power, a power the demons recognize immediately: "What do you have to do with me, Jesus, the Son of the Most High God?" they scream, and plead with him "not to order them to go back into the abyss." **Jesus exercises divine authority to confront and cast out demons – to disperse the powers of evil and chaos – and to restore to wholeness what they have torn apart.**

Dear church, demons still run wild today, unleashing brokenness and suffering wherever they're found. Their final expulsion, it seems, will have to wait

⁴ See David J. Lose, <http://www.davidlose.net/2016/06/pentecost-5-c-god-in-the-shadow-lands/>.

until the fullness of time.⁵ But **Jesus lives, and wherever *he* is found, the demons scatter. We cannot be held captive by our prejudice or hostility, our distrust or fear, our shame or despair. Jesus casts out our demons and replaces them with peace that passes understanding. He clothes us with mercy, and restores our humanity and our hope.**

And finally, he gives us a purpose: “Return..., and declare how much God has done for you,” he says. Get up, dust yourself off, and go insist that demons do not get the last word. Go to where animosity and fear wound relationships, and speak a word of peace. Go to where homophobia or Islamophobia lurk beneath the surface, and speak a word of love. Cross the boundaries Jesus would cross, and embody the healing he still has to offer the world.

⁵ See Elaine A. Heath, in *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Vol. 3, 168.