

Second Weekend After Pentecost (RCL/C)

“Our Friend ‘Joe,’ Our Friend John & Us: Jesus Often Heals & Always Saves”

Luke 8:26-39

June 22-23, 2019

Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

Call me crazy, but this is one of my favorite Gospel stories of all! This is even though it tells of deep suffering and deals with demons and doesn't have a totally happy ending. If it were just a short account of exorcism, I might not like it so much. But it's rich with really interesting details and I think of it as a story about holistic healing.

This is the kind of Scripture that makes people wonder, “What does this have to do with our 21st century lives **at all???**” Let me do a little reframing, hopefully to help us see this as a story that really can **resurrect** hope and **deepen** faith in a world that can **fracture** hope and **deadened** faith.

The whole thing about demon possession may convince us that we're not going to understand this story a bit. We've got a fellow who once was a city dweller, a “normal” guy we guess, who's now out of his mind, violent beyond belief, frightening his neighbors to the point that they chained him up, unsuccessfully, because like some 1<sup>st</sup> century version of the Hulk he's burst out of his bonds and out of his clothes, and is now running around naked among the tombs outside of town.

It's interesting that the man comes out of hiding and reenters civilization to greet Jesus as He gets off the boat. Could that have been the remnant of health inside the man reaching out for healing? A soul locked in darkness reaching out toward the light? A dreadfully ill patient seeking out the Great Physician with one last ounce of strength?

When we look at these Bible stories of demon possession through modern eyes, we wonder what physical or mental illness plagued these poor people. Here's our point of connection: **there are ills which plague us, too**. Some of them are so overwhelming, we can feel like we're losing our mind – or our very identity. Jesus asks the demon-driven man, "What is your name?" He says, "Legion." (Luke 8:30) One writer has suggested "**Mob**" as a not-too-shabby substitute for "Legion"<sup>1</sup>.

The guy certainly had another name before "the demons" descended. Let's just call him Joe. Joe became so "possessed" by life-crushing forces that he experienced a total loss of identity. A "mob" of destructive factors had wiped out his previous existence as surely as the dementors in Harry Potter books suck happiness out of their victims. I think we can assume he'd been employed, he'd had a family, he'd had a home. He was certainly part of a community. He'd lost all that.

Every time this story comes up I think of our church friend, John Steele, who passed away a number of years back but who was lector when this Gospel was read over 20 years ago. How could I possibly remember that? Because John gave the most powerful sermon ever preached here in one little sound bite. After the Gospel and homily, he said something along the lines of, "Now I'm going to tell you what God has done for **me**. God gave this drunk his life back." Then he returned to the prepared script and began reading the prayers of the church. John was very open and generous with his Holy Trinity family, his AA family, anyone who would listen, sharing about how he'd almost killed himself by driving drunk into a local canal, where a friend fished him out. He told us how his marriage was falling apart and he was no kind of father to his children and his job was on the rocks and he was in danger of becoming homeless and alone, before he hit bottom and got sober, by the grace of God.

What's one way the U.S. Prohibitionists in the 20's referred to liquor? "**Demon** rum."

Armed with modern medical and psychological understanding, we absolutely do not say alcoholics or drug addicts or the mentally ill are demon-possessed. But I do think most of those afflicted would agree that their illnesses have stolen health of body, mind and spirit and tattered their self-identity. Like the leper elsewhere in Luke's Gospel, each one of those suffering children of God, deep in their heart or right on their lips, is saying, "Lord, if you will, you can heal me." (Luke 5:12)

In healing stories like that leper's, people who are sick seek out Jesus for themselves. In other stories, their relatives, like the Syrophenician mother of the little girl who said she'd accept crumbs from under the table, or friends, like the buddies of the paralytic who lowered him through the roof, or the centurion who sent word to Jesus about his dying slave, ask Jesus to heal their loved ones. In this case, though, Jesus crosses the Sea of Galilee to find and heal this man.

I don't know which case, if any, you identify with. Are you feeling broken and in need of mending yourself? Do you feel like you've lost your moorings and been taken over by anxiety or depression or fears? Or are you storming heaven on behalf of a loved one, either family member or friend?

Here's the Good News. Jesus sees. Jesus cares. Jesus is strong to save. We ask, "Will I ever be my old self again?" "Will he or she ever be his or her old self again?" There are no guarantees of that. God's not big on making the hands of the clock go backwards. But we have holy hope that by God's grace we and our loved ones can become our **new** selves. In the Book of Revelation (21:5) Jesus says, "See, I make all things new."

Our Gospel describes the amazement of the people who had known the possessed man before his encounter with Jesus and then found him after:

*...sitting at the feet of Jesus, clothed and in his right mind... Those who had seen it told them how the one who had been possessed by demons had been healed.*

*(Luke 8:35-36)*

The word for *healed* is the same as *saved*. **Jesus often heals and Jesus always saves.**

I don't want to sound like Pastor Pollyana here. I've prayed for loved ones to recover from sicknesses that ultimately killed them. I've prayed for loved ones with dementia, and those prayers more often brought me comfort instead of visibly lessening any of dementia's devastating effects. But I have no doubt Jesus **has** saved my loved ones in the most important sense, and that they are alive with Him in heaven.

The demons in the story enter a herd of pigs and rush down a steep bank into the lake where they all drown. We began our life as Christians with a "drowning" in the waters of Baptism, just like Benjamin Michael will this weekend. Water has often been associated with the dispelling of demons, hence the ancient practice of sprinkling the faithful with holy water and even the melting of the Wicked Witch of the West with a bucket of water in *The Wizard of Oz*.

This weekend's epistle from Galatians says,

*"As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ."*  
(Galatians 3:27)

Our friend from the Gospel whom we've dubbed "Joe" goes from being naked to sitting clothed at our Lord's feet. He who was possessed by a "Legion" of problems is healed and claimed by Christ. He "follows" Jesus not by leaving with Him but by returning home and

*...proclaiming throughout the city how much Jesus had done for him.* (Luke 8:39)

We're called to do the same, to **tell how much the Lord has done for us**: clothed and healed and in our right minds, with rejoicing and grateful hearts! Amen

<sup>1</sup>*New Interpreter's Bible* (Vol. IX, Nashville: Abingdon, 1995), p. 188.

