

Second Weekend After Pentecost (RCL/C)
Luke 8:26-39
June 18-19, 2022
Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

“Wash your hands and say your prayers, because Jesus and germs are everywhere!”

That’s a sign in our church kitchen, borrowed from the Methodists down the block ☺.

Especially with COVID, we’re continually being reminded to wash our hands and keep our hands away from our face, our eyes, our mouth, because that’s how germs enter and how people get sick. In Jesus’ day many people believed demons entered the same way: through the mouth, the nose, even through the ears. So lots of folks wore charms or amulets to ward off evil, like people in our day having a rabbit’s foot on their key chain for good luck or an Italian horn around their neck to ward off the evil eye. In the Gospel Jesus asks the demoniac, *“What is your name?” He said, ‘Legion’; for many demons had entered him.*” (Luke 8:30) Instead of *“Legion,”* the name the man gives in *The Message* is *“Mob.”* That word paints a picture of a **gang** of spiritual thugs holding him hostage within himself.

It’s so interesting that Jesus crosses the Sea of Galilee to be where this man lives – or maybe we should say where this man **exists**, because it’s sure not a life any of us would choose. He’s **crazed** much of the time, stripping himself naked, terrifying his neighbors to the point that they put shackles on him, experiencing superhuman strength in the midst of his psychosis, **breaking** those shackles, and finding refuge from the elements and his frightened, hostile neighbors within nearby cave-tombs. **This guy** is the welcoming committee as Jesus gets out of the boat in the country of the Gerasenes, pagan territory.

If the demons are so intent on setting up housekeeping in this particular man’s body and soul, why do they seek Jesus out instead of staying in the tombs where He’d never have

guessed they were? Maybe the person who still lived deep inside that tormented man saw or sensed light on the horizon, just as Jesus had headed like a bee toward honey to the man whose identity had been expunged by the Mob. He and Jesus end up in the same place at the same time, the man is made whole, and that can't be coincidence. That's a definite **God-incidence**, or **God-wink** as some people call it.

But what's it got to do with **us**? Many folks dismiss Scripture because they see it as a bunch of dusty old tales that have no relationship, no relevance, to our lives in the 21st century. Really?? As one person has explained, "Modern psychology has only given new names to ancient demons."¹ Another scholar has written that this story:

...speaks a word of assurance and hope to those for whom every day is a battle with depression, fear, anxiety, or compulsive behavior. They will understand what would lead a person to say that his name is "mob" ... [T]he man... no longer had any individual identity. He had lost his name. He had lost his individuality. It was as though a Roman legion was at war within him.²

We know what it's like to feel there's a war within us during difficult times. We want Jesus to meet us where we're at and to command, "Peace! Be still!" as He did to wind and waves on the journey over the lake from Galilee. We want to be made whole. Sort of. Unless we have to give up what's become familiar. Unless we're called to drive beyond our headlights, trusting God will lead us safely into the unknown, a holy promised future. Unless we're called to plough new ground, which can be scary and comes with no guarantee of success.

The man called the demoniac, the man whose demons called themselves "Legion," the man whose real name is lost to history, is **thrilled** that Jesus has liberated him from the Mob that was killing him from the inside out. Others weren't so sure. Here's the way the story goes in *The Message*. It picks up after the demons have relocated to the herd of pigs which then plunges over the cliff to a watery death. (Water, of course, is bad news for

anything up to no good, whether it's germs, or the bucket of water that melts the Wicked Witch of the West, or the drowning of "witches" in colonial New England, or the drowning of our sin in the waters of Baptism.)

34-36 Those tending the pigs, scared to death, bolted and told their story in town and country. People went out to see what had happened. They came to Jesus and found the man from whom the demons had been sent, sitting there at Jesus' feet, wearing decent clothes and making sense. It was a holy moment, and for a short time they were more reverent than curious. Then those who had seen it happen told how the demoniac had been saved.

37-39 Later, a great many people from the Gerasene countryside got together and asked Jesus to leave—too much change, too fast, and they were scared. So Jesus got back in the boat and set off.

How sad is that?! "Jesus, scram. Better the devil we know than the Savior we don't. We've learned to co-exist with our demons. We don't want to evict them, because we've lived with this evil for so long it feels like a part of us and we've lost sight of how it damages us. **If You're going to ask us to give something up, Jesus, if You're going to ask us to change, leave. The status quo may be miserable, but it's familiar and predictable.**"

Not so for the man who is now clothed, in his right mind, once again at home in his own body, sitting at Jesus' feet, like a disciple. He's okay with Jesus leaving, because he intends to go with Him!

The man whom he had delivered from the demons asked to go with [Jesus], but [Jesus] sent him back, saying, "Go home and tell everything God did in you." So he went back and preached all over town everything Jesus had done in him.

I can never tell this story without thinking of John Steele, one of our church friends who joined the Church Triumphant a number of years ago. John was assisting minister the day this Gospel was read. After we sang the hymn of the day and prayed the Creed it was John's turn to lead us in the prayers of the Church. Before doing so he paused, smiled, and

said, “We’re told to tell what God has done for us. Well, today this drunk stands before you, by the grace of God. Let us pray....”

John was very generous sharing the story of how his alcoholism almost lost him his job, his family, his wife, and his life. One night, in the midst of the mess his drinking had created, he was driving under the influence, ended up in the canal and almost drowned before he was pulled out. More than John’s life was saved that night. That was how he hit bottom, and by God’s grace rebounded up into recovery. John Steele was an extraordinary mentor to others, over decades, helping teens, men and women get into recovery and stay there, day in and day out. He was tough and wise enough to exert tough love when necessary. His talk was no nonsense. “You’ve got to leave the booze behind or it will either kill you or cause you to kill someone else.” He saw the person beneath the wreckage, the real self under the inebriated self, the brother or sister in need of human help and God’s grace.

Jesus saw the person beneath the wreck of the man labeled as “Legion.” He calls us to see with His eyes, looking beyond the scary or strange or off-putting appearance or behavior of our brothers and sisters, ministering to their physical and spiritual needs, and leading them to Jesus for the fullest healing. It’s only possible if we stay in close proximity to our Lord, allowing Him to cast out our demons, one by one, over time, separating us from whatever separates us from Him and from each other. Along the Way, let’s be generous in telling what God is doing for us. Amen

¹*Interpreter’s Bible*, Vol. 8 (NY: Abingdon, 1951), p. 156.

²*New Interpreter’s Bible*, Vol. IX (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995), p. 188.

