**St. Aidan’s Episcopal Church**

**The Second Sunday after Pentecost**

**Proper 7**

**1 Kings 19: 1-15a**

 **Psalms 42, 43**

**Galatians 3:23-29**

**Luke 8:26-39**

**War of the Demons**



So, two sheep are in conversation. First sheep, looking deeply offended, says to the second sheep, who looks defensive, holding his takeout coffee cup, “So…a herd of pigs drowns and that’s it.” Second sheep, “No! the man is sent to tell everyone what God has done for him!” First sheep, “Sure… tell that to the pigs!”

It’s funny and we laugh, because deep down, we don’t like to think of the graphic nature of this story which is disturbing for many of us who love animals, especially pigs. So before we enter too far into what is really going on, let’s put to rest our 21st century sensibilities which would have seemed extremely wimpy and squeamish in Jesus’ time and in his culture. Eliminating, for just a moment, the moral ethics of your thoughts about such things, imagine for a moment the most fearsome, or most revolting creature to you. Think about stepping on a slug or snake bare footed, or coming face to face with a swarm of angry wasps. Would you think twice about the outcomes for their lives? Heck no! Transfer all my demons to these critters and throw them overboard for good! Thanks be to God!

 OK. All better now? Good. Understanding that to Jesus, a practicing and devout Jew, for whom pigs were an abomination and unclean, their destruction meant very little to Jesus and thus this action of sending them to their death shouldn’t trouble us too much. Add to this, Middle Eastern demonology which held that evil spirits cannot survive in water. Later in Luke’s Gospel he tells of Jesus describing demons inhabiting “waterless regions.”[[1]](#footnote-1) Thus, when Jesus allows the demons to enter all the pigs, the demons plunge into their instant destruction, along with the pigs. And the question now remains, even to those of us who are card-carrying members of the People for Ethical Treatment of Animals, the Humane Society and the ASPCA: is the destruction of a legion of evil spirits worth the loss of life of innocent pigs? Only God knows, and clearly knew in the moment. However, I can tell you this for certain. The swineherds who made a good living selling pork to the Gentiles, were madder than you know what, and they didn’t keep quiet about what happened, which added to chaos in people’s thinking: fear, anger and all the rest that totally missed or ignored the fact that a very sick man had been made well.

But who are we to judge? It is rarely easy for us, living in the world today, going about our ordinary life, to imagine the awesome power of God to eliminate the demons in our own lives. We try, and we give it lip service, admitting without truly comprehending that God does have the absolute dominion, awesome resistance and power over evil, while at the same time, holding unmatchable compassion for the most vulnerable and the lost. It is the core of Luke’s scripture today.

Jesus has come to a place opposite Galilee. A place where people haven’t heard of him and are skeptical of his message. Nevertheless, a Gerasene man, who is clearly deeply troubled, immediately presents himself before Jesus. Luke tells of how much he is known to be possessed by uncountable demons and by the time he encounters Jesus, he is exhausted by their presence, to the point where he has forgotten who he was and is foregoing clothing and living as an outcast in the community. He has become so unpredictable and downright scary in the community, so much so that he is often put in shackles and kept in some sort of dungeons, in the darkness….out of the way, out of sight and mind.

Looking at the story straight on, we are presented with a show-down between good and evil: the power of God versus the grip the demons have on the man. Current understanding leans toward our recognition that demons actually do exist in the form of addictions, psychiatric issues, emotional and mental health disfunction, but knowing this is not really essential to our understanding that, however one can diagnose it, the man is in deep distress.

That the man’s life is out of control is evident and clearly intense. He calls himself “Legion” in answer to Jesus’ request for his name, because he can only think of himself as riddled with the influence and control of these countless demons within himself.

And how near or how far are we away from saying the same if asked to describe ourselves? We may think we are in complete control of our lives and perhaps we think we allow God to be in control, yet do we not succumb to the realities of our daily modern life which invade our best perspectives on who is really in control?

Continual issues hammer at us from daily descriptions of innocent people being killed by war, by gun violence, to the daily barrage of hundreds of tiny irritations and annoyances brought about by unfriendly, impatient encounters, COVID reports, or a printer that won’t work! We are dealing with fearful demons dancing all around us, creating new inner demons of fear and judgement, accusation, and hatred,. Every one of these and many, many more, keep at us, robbing of us time and energy, and vital resources, and too often successfully distract us from remembering that we can be in relationship with God, which would provide us with powerful strength to overcome the destructive influence of most of these worldly challenges.

We cannot afford to allow ourselves to flail weakly in the face of these demons for, make no mistake, we are at war with the demons of the world. John Calvin wrote about these demonic distractions, admonishing us to always be aware that, “we have to wage war against an infinite number of enemies lest…… we should be too remiss to give battle, or thinking that we are sometimes rewarded with some respite, we should yield to idleness.”[[2]](#footnote-2)

In other words, we need to keep aware and recognize all that attempts to interfere with our relationship to the fullness of life in God. We have to hold fast to that relationship by standing strongly against the influence of the demons unleashed at large in the world.

This kind of awareness is very present and very evident in the face to face encounter between Jesus and the demons. These unclean spirits have no need to ask the question “Who are you?” They are very aware of who is standing before them and their first question asks, full of defensiveness and bravado, “What are you going to do with me?”

Yet it’s one thing to be aware of God’s presence, and having done so, being able to submit to the power of that presence. The demons wanted to keep on keeping on, even if they could not do so in the man’s body. So, they chose a herd of swine and asked that they find a home there, whereupon, their desire for self-preservation became the means of their destruction and the pigs carrying their evil cargo, plunged headlong into the lake and drowned. The man, now freed of his demons, sane and civil, was left safely at the feet of Jesus.

We are given a glimpse now of how it is when we come face to face with the presence of God while in the midst of the chaos and confusion in our own lives. As faithful Christians, who know and understand the healing power and the salvation of Christ, our human instincts still have the power to send us scurrying in different directions, all leading away from God. We can probably think of our propensity to succumb to the very demons from whose clutches we want so very much for God to free us, relying on ourselves, resisting change, fleeing to the familiar and comfortable, often to our own disappointments, living a life that seems void of any perspective of faith, so powerful is the grip of the demons we carry within. It was only when the man threw himself at the feet of Jesus that he found hope and transformation, and it is the same for us.

That hope, that transformation and that peace, is ours whenever we find the strength and courage to decide to fall at the feet of Jesus, asking for the strength and courage to overcome all that would work against all that we desire: to be undistracted by the world, undistracted by the demons that work to destroy our faith and trust in God. That transforming peace is ours when we find the strength through God to turn away from a life controlled and directed by influences that do us no good, or even harm us.

Yet, like the Geresenes, who feared the Son of God more than the unclean spirits that led the man to create fear in all he encountered we, too often turn away from God’s direction if it means leaving all that we are used to for a new, God-inspired way of life.

Could it be that we would sometimes rather hang on to the troubles we know and recognize as our norms, than to change into ways that are new and, therefore, uncomfortable for us? Do we often prefer the demons we know to the freedom we don’t?

Let us find encouragement through the man freed of his demons. He is showing us the way toward victory over his demons rather than becoming a victim of their controlling power. He has been given the gift of a new life, a new perspective, a new vocation, even though the people continued to leave him alone, perhaps afraid of being asked to face their own brand of demons that could only, always bring out the worst in them.

We must take heart and be filled with gratitude for this strange story. Perhaps, instead of deciding it is easier to live with our demons rather than to take the initiative with God for God to rid us of them, we should fall down in mind, body or soul, before our God and beg for our demons to be overcome so that we, too, may “return to our home(s), and declare how much God has done for you (us).” Perhaps, in order to truly follow Jesus, we have to ask Him to rid us of our demons so that we, like the man can regain the truth of our own identity, to know who we truly are, in order to go forth to do the work he has created us to do. Perhaps, somebody, somewhere will stop to hear our story and we simply keep walking past the ones who don’t, brushing the dust from our feet. But we never stop telling the story of the awesome power of God to make us clean and whole.

And, perhaps, just perhaps, this odd encounter and its story about the war of the demons that the man had to tell, was one of the most important stories the world had to hear.

That is, except for the pigs.

Amen.

Written to the Glory of God

E. J. R. Culver+

June 19, 2022

1. Luke 11:24 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion.* Ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Form Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press. 1960), I.14.14. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)