

Proper 7**Bound and Free****Luke 8:26-39**

A sermon preached by the Rev. Richard C. Israel, Associate Rector at St. Paul's Episcopal Church on June 20, 2010.

C. S. Lewis wrote, "There are two equal and opposite errors into which our race can fall about the devils. One is to disbelieve their existence. The other is to believe, and to feel an excessive and unhealthy interest in them. They themselves are equally pleased by both errors and hail a materialist and magician with the same delight."

From Mary Shelly's "Frankenstein" to "The Nightmare on Elm Streets" Freddy Krueger, from J. K. Rowling's Voldemort to Stephanie Meier's vampire "Voltaire", we seem to have a fascination with creating new monsters. In response to the question, why are we constantly on the lookout for bigger, scarier "bumps in the night?" Leonard Sweet writes, "Maybe we need our monsters to be as unlike ourselves as possible so that we can ignore the presence of the real monsters that possess us...from the inside out."

While demonology isn't a topic likely to come up at a dinner party, it's hard to avoid talking about demon possession after reading a text like today's gospel lesson. However, being mindful of C. S. Lewis' warning, I want to explore Luke's reason for telling us this story.

The "Gerasene demoniac" is a classic "monster". He is not like the other people who lived in his community. He runs around naked. He doesn't live in a house, but among the tombs cut into the side of a cliff. He is out of his mind. When seized by the demons that possessed him, he was strong enough to break free of the chains and shackles by which his community sought to restrain him. He is depicted by Luke as the "ultimate outcast". From a Jewish perspective, he is unclean in every conceivable way: naked, living among the dead, homeless, violent, and surrounded by swine.

The theme of the 8th chapter of Luke's gospel in which we find this text has to do with the authority of Jesus to create a kingdom of peace for all people, based on justice and compassion. Luke's gospel is all about reversal; bringing good news to the poor, release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind. In this chapter Luke gives us one miracle story after another, revealing Jesus' power over nature, demonic forces, sickness, and even death.

Intentionally, setting this story in Gentile territory, Luke wants his readers to see that there are no limits to Jesus' authority. Having survived a frightening storm on the Sea of Galilee, the disciples must have been thanking their lucky stars to set their feet on solid ground. But as they get out of the boat, they hear strange sounds coming from the tombs...shrieks, growls, screams, moans, the rattling of chains. Then suddenly, a horrifying sight! A madman comes running and screaming directly toward them, "What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God?"

Without hesitation, Jesus asks, “What is your name?” In Jewish teaching, to know a person’s name was thought to give you power over him. “Legion”, he replies, acknowledging that he no longer has a name of his own, but is now only known by his infirmity, by the magnitude of his oppression. Recognizing Jesus’ power, the demons that possessed the man begged him not to send them to the abyss, the watery grave in which they could not live. They begged instead to be sent into a herd of pigs which then fled like lemmings into the sea, an irony that would not be lost on Luke’s Jewish readers.

New Testament scholar David Lose writes, “...I imagine Jesus’ healing of him as something akin to giving him a new name.” Giving someone a new name is quite common in Scripture. Jacob, after wrestling with the angel at the river Jabbok and confessing his checkered past became Israel, the one who “strives with God”. Saul who persecuted the early church became Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles. Lose goes on to say, “Names—good names as well as bad ones—are powerful. So Jesus doesn’t just cast out his demons, doesn’t just alleviate his condition, but gives him a new name and with it a new and open future.”

We live in a sophisticated age that recoils from thoughts of demonic possession. However, if you, like me, can reflect on the fears and anxieties and accusing voices that seem to creep into the wee hours of the night when sleep is not always possible, you might at least admit that we live in a culture that breeds destructive appetites. Some people face demons of anxiety; some addictive lifestyles; others suffer from depression and discouragement that leaves them paralyzed. But there are other more subtle demons that affect us as well.

Leonard Sweet writes, “The fact is we live in a culture that suffers from a ‘legion’ of possessing spirits, as toxic and traumatic as those that came raging forth from the Geresene demoniac.

The spew from one of our most destructive demons is even now washing up in greasy globs all along the coastlines in the Gulf of Mexico.

We are possessed by a life style lubricated by more and more oil. We will do anything to keep the grease coming.

We are possessed by a greed that puts profits before protecting people and the planet.

We are possessed by an insatiable desire for ‘more stuff’—and the cost of that ‘stuff’ is increasingly deadly.”

Like the Gerasene demoniac we know how it feels to be powerless in the face of these demons so we distract ourselves with fictionalized demons. But Jesus knows us and still comes, as he did to the man called Legion, to turn our lives around, to show us that our lives find meaning when we surrender to his will; that we will “find” ourselves, come to “a right mind”, when we trust his vision of a reconciling, liberating community for all that he invites us to participate in creating.

We gather here each Sunday to remember that God has called us by a new name and opened to us a new future. We were given the name of “Christ” at Baptism, and with it the promise that no matter what happens—no matter where we may go or what we may do or

what may be done to us—God will always regard us as beloved children. And armed with that new name and the promise of a life-giving future, we are sent out into the world to share what God has done for us and will bring to pass through us.

At times, this may seem pitifully insignificant in the face of the suffering and oppression that too often seem to govern our world, but remember this. Names really are powerful. Because we bear Christ's name we have found brothers and sisters in S. Africa and 2100 Lakeside and Miles Park and in Harlan, KY. When we live by the name of Christ, we have the power to provide shelter and a home to families in need as we do this week for our IHN guests who will change us as we share in community with them. Living by the name of Christ, we find a vision to advocate for justice for the oppressed and sustainability for the earth that has been entrusted to us whose wellbeing comes from God, not from our possessions. In all these ways and more, God's new name given to us has the power to lead us through death into life, into a future under God's control in which both the poor and rich will hear good news, the blind will see, and all who are held captive or suffer oppression will be set free.