

The Second Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 7)
Luke 8:26-39

The Rev. Lisa Green
June 23, 2019

This is one of those gospels, isn't it, just strange, disturbing even? A naked guy living in the tombs, Jesus making a deal with demons, suicidal swine stampeding into the Sea of Galilee. When I told my daughter Mary that I was going to preach on this story today, she said, "Those poor pigs." Which was true to character, because twenty-five years ago when she heard the Exodus story in Sunday School, those pursuing Egyptian chariots swallowed up by the Red Sea, she said, "I feel sorry for the horses." And don't get her started on Noah's Ark.

But even though the other readings are much more appealing, I decided to go ahead and talk about the gospel today, because it's about God's power to free us from everything that keeps us from being fully alive, from being in our right mind—and those things are indeed Legion. Jesus' ministry of casting out demons has popped up in the lectionary on my preaching Sundays a few other times since I've been here, and each time I've been tempted to engage with it but ended up balking by the end of the week and preaching about something else. But today is it!

First of all, as you can tell from the way I said what I think this weird gospel is really about, I'm setting the bar low for "demons." One of my fellow pilgrims from my first Holy Land trip three years ago considers himself to have a ministry of casting out demons, and the way he does that is by simply asking people when they're chatting, like sitting next to each other on a plane, "What is one word you'd like to banish from your vocabulary?" What pops out is a clue to what's burdening them, what they may be obsessing about, what's holding them back from wholehearted living.

Think about the struggles and temptations of your own life—maybe a time when you were trying to make a positive change, like giving up an unhealthy habit, or starting a healthy one, or turning in a new direction or taking little steps toward a goal. Chances are a chorus of voices in your head chimed in with all the reasons why that's not a good idea, or it will never succeed, or will have a tremendous downside, and who do you think you are for having such an ambitious plan in the first place? Voices questioning our worth as beloved children of God are everywhere, leading us to self-doubt, cynicism, and despair. We moderns tend to assume that's all human-made, psychological self-talk or toxic cultural messages, but ancient people (and their descendants who have kept connected to their wisdom) see a more nuanced and active cosmos, alive with influences and agents of light and dark.

C.S. Lewis created such a cosmos in his science fiction trilogy, in which a professor named Ransom travels to Mars and Venus in cooperation with heavenly beings called *eldils* who are

helping free Earth from their negative counterparts. “Like the bacteria on the microscopic level,” Lewis writes, “so these co-inhabiting pests on the macroscopic permeate our whole life invisibly and are the real explanation of that fatal bent which is the main lesson of history.” That may sound fantastical, but it’s traditional Christian cosmology.

So the second reason I decided to “go there” today is that next Sunday when the Bishop comes we’ll be renewing our baptismal vows, which included renouncing evil and committing to Christ. We don’t talk about the first part as much, but the existence of the dark side—around us, among us, and within us—is implicit in Christian belief and practice. At the most basic level, you can hear this ancient understanding of cosmic reality every time we say the Lord’s Prayer, asking God to “deliver us from evil.” At baptisms, we ask the candidates (or their parents and godparents) to renounce three things: Satan and all the spiritual forces of wickedness that rebel against God (around us), the evil powers of this world which corrupt and destroy the creatures of God (among us), and all sinful desires that draw them from the love of God (within us). After promising to turn away from those things, they get three questions in the other direction: “Do you turn to Jesus Christ and accept him as your Savior? Do you put your whole trust in his grace and love? Do you promise to follow and obey him as your Lord?” We Christians love threes.

But as I say, we modern post-enlightenment Christians are likely to consider that language about “spiritual forces of wickedness” as metaphorical—and that’s not entirely a bad thing. In the Preface to *The Screwtape Letters*, Lewis wrote, “There are two equal and opposite errors into which our race can fall about the devils. One is to disbelieve in 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 or a magician with the same delight.” *Screwtape*, as you may know, is a purported collection of letters from an older to a younger devil giving advice about how to tempt and lead astray his human “patient.” It’s one of Lewis’ most popular books—and has actually become a stage play that’s being performed June 29 in Richmond and next month in Norfolk. I found out this week that the idea for the book occurred to Lewis while he sat in church listening to a lackluster sermon, so there’s that.

So what’s the Anglican “middle road” between dismissing this Biblical and liturgical language about demons and evil powers as fanciful relics of an outdated worldview on the one hand, and veering into that “excessive and unhealthy interest” Lewis warns against on the other hand? I’d say it’s having a reasonable and healthy respect for the complexity and mystery of creation. Again, we nod in this direction every Sunday, when we say in the Nicene Creed that God is the “maker of heaven and earth, of all that is, seen and unseen.” If invisible physical forces like gravity and magnetism affect us, why not spiritual forces? In fact, the Greek root of our word *diabolical* means to throw apart, to separate. And what divides us? Thinking some of us are

better and more deserving than others, scapegoating people who are different from us for all that is wrong in the world, justifying oppression and violence to keep those hierarchies intact. Things like racism, anti-Semitism, sexism, homophobia, injustice of all kinds are systemic, bigger than any one person, carried on through generations—and they certainly corrupt and destroy the creatures of God. And people struggling with addiction know all too well about the desires that draw them away from the lives God wants for them.

And as any of you in recovery know, the Twelve Steps begin with acknowledging our powerlessness and believing that a power greater than ourselves can restore us to sanity. And so when Jesus ventured beyond the borders of his people to the land opposite Galilee (modern-day Jordan), he was immediately met by this man, naked, isolated, driven into the wilds by forces he could not control. At Jesus' word the demons left him, and the next thing the townspeople knew, he was sitting at Jesus' feet, clothed and in his right mind. That's the power of God to free us from everything that keeps us from being fully alive.

"As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ," writes Paul to the Galatians. "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus." That kind of unity and wholeness, around us and among us and within us, is possible only (as we say in the baptismal vows) with God's help. God will deliver us from evil, cast out those demons, as we keep turning toward Christ, putting our whole trust in his grace and love, following and obeying him as Lord—and then going out to proclaim what God has done for us. For as Paul writes elsewhere, "I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."