

John F. Carter

St. John's Episcopal Church

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Pentecost 4/C

DAIMON/DEMON

Angels in the shadows: demons in the light.

Today is the eve of the summer solstice, the time when, according to the ancients, the "sun stands still" in the mysterious union of the opposites of light and dark.

In today's gospel narrative, Jesus and his disciples cross the Sea of Galilee to the country of the Gerasenes, which, Luke tells us, "is opposite Galilee". Not only is Gerasa on the opposing shore, but the religion and culture are also opposite. Galilee is Jewish and under Roman occupation. Gerasa is Gentile and apparently not gripped by the talons of Rome. Yet, this crossing by Jesus will lead to the union of these two cultures as different as day and night.

Today's story celebrates a mission into Gentile territory, into the land of the "opposite" and the "other". In the larger context of Luke's narrative, it is a celebration of the victory of the powers of God-in-Jesus over the forces of darkness, chaos, demons and exclusivity. In the story that *precedes* this one Jesus calms the storm on the sea, pacifying its chaos and demonic character. In the story that *follows* today's gospel, Jesus raises a girl to life and restores a mature woman to community. These are all victories over death, demons, chaos, "uncleanness" and banishment.

There are some textual problems in the gospel since the town of Gerasa was actually 60 kilometers southeast of the Galilean Lake, which would mean that the swine would have a long schlep to the sea. Later, subsequent editors, including Origen, renamed the town so the story would make sense. But the power of the story does not rely upon factuality. This story and others about Jesus acclaim him as liberator from *whatever* chains that bind, as healer who helps us cast out demons, and as the one who brings new life to the tombs that hold us captive.

The early Christians understood Jesus as a revolutionary who wielded the power of liberation at all levels, political, psychological, economic, religious and spiritual. Recalling the promises made last Sunday at the baptisms of Lucia and Matt, we are called to "renounce Satan and all the spiritual forces of wickedness that rebel against God" and to confront as well "the evil powers of this world which corrupt and destroy the creatures of God". These promissory utterances call us to join forces with Jesus in the dramatic encounter between the old era of oppression and the new one of liberation.

In his letter to the Galatian Christian community, Paul celebrates the inclusivity that is the hallmark of the new era: "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus." This rare vision of unity, which transcends either-or thinking, still inspires and challenges.

Today's gospel is full of potent symbols: the sea as place of danger, pigs as unclean animals, tombs and cemeteries ... the abode of spirits to be avoided in darkness, chains that bind humankind. The demons (or demon) tell Jesus that their name is "Legion". *Legion* was a designation for one of Rome's armies. The legion stationed in Palestine had a boar (male pig) on its flag. Luke's listeners would have been tickled by the inference of Rome being the place of demons.

((Because we can all be "possessed" by one thing or another, we may relate to the following story. The psychology instructor had just finished a lecture on mental health and was giving an oral test.

She asked, "How would you diagnose a patient who walks back and forth screaming at the top of his lungs one minute, then sits in a chair weeping uncontrollably the next?"

A young man in the rear raised his hand and answered, "A basketball coach?")

In Jewish folklore, "a *dybbuk* (Hebrew for "one that cleaves) is a malignant spirit which attaches itself to the living and takes over their personality. A dybbuk is a naked soul that is not at rest ...and must find an already occupied body left vulnerable by sin. The dybbuk speaks through a person's mouth with a new voice, and a change of personality takes place." (Dictionary of Jewish Lore and Legend by Alan Unterman) Labeling is never perfect, but the idiom of modern psychology might refer to such a condition as *schizophrenia* or *multiple personality disorder*. Spiritualists might call it *possession*. In either nomenclature, the person who carries the dybbuk experiences great suffering. The symptoms fit the demoniac, "a man of the city" who meets Jesus as he steps out on land. It appears that the man with the demons knew Jesus was coming and comes out purposefully to meet him. Not a chance encounter. They speak a common language. Jesus engages the man and his demons in a way that no one else has.

The demoniac is one of the most tormented and pitiful creatures in scripture. Wretchedness and misery define his life, or living death. He wears no clothes, lives in the tombs, is possessed and tormented, banished from "the city" and kept under guard with chains and shackles. These he would break out of only to be "driven by the demons into the wilds". This is a person with no wholeness, health or community except the colony of demons that possess him. He or the demons in him are supernaturally strong, powerful enough to break chains. It would be quite scary to meet up with such a person; unkempt, naked, unruly, crazed. We would probably recoil, instinctually sensing something dangerous or ambushed by an aspect of ourselves we would rather confine

to the “tombs”. The demoniac is a person of deep sorrows and disturbing countenance who is rejected by all.

How might this one astonish us with holiness? Can we find the image of God in this poor soul? He is like the suffering servant of whom Isaiah wrote 500 years before Jesus, “He had no form or comeliness that we should look at him...He was despised and rejected by all, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief.” Indeed, Jesus himself, on the cross will be similarly rejected, his tortured face and body impossible to behold.

In today’s gospel, the demons are afraid of Jesus and his power. He asks, “What is your name?”. What cannot be named cannot be exorcized. The demons, who are pathetic in their own right, beg Jesus “not to order them to go back into the abyss” from whence they came. In their impassioned plea even the demons become somewhat sympathetic characters. If we dare risk the encounter, the face of evil often turns out to be more human, more like us, than we imagine at first. In *The Wizard of Oz*, Dorothy and her three courageous friends make this astonishing discovery when they finally meet the wizard and see that he is only a sad, small man.

((Some thoughts from others concerning demons: From Gene Wilder, “I don’t believe in devils, but demons I do, because everyone at one time or another has some kind of demon, even if you call it by another name.” From Matthew Fox, “Evil is the shadow of angel. Just as there are angels of light, support, guidance, healing and defense, we have experiences of shadow angels. And we have names for them: racism, sexism, homophobia are all demons ... but they are not out *there*.” August Williams writes, “Confront the dark parts of yourself, and work to banish them with illumination and forgiveness. Your willingness to wrestle with your demons will cause your angels to sing.”))

The Hebrew word, *shed*, translated as demon, was a putdown of the gods of other tribes. These gods were considered insolent, putting on airs, thinking they were as good as the God of Israel. In classical Greek, the word *daimon* simply meant “a divinity”, neither good or evil. It is interesting that over time this neutral term was bifurcated and dualized so that we end up with two different spiritual forces completely at odds with each other. Or, so it seems. The Greek etymology has profound implications, namely that our angels and demons have the same origin.

Our hard definitions of good and evil are much softer than we might like. The fact that this man’s demons see into a spiritual reality that eludes the residents of Gerasa points to the recognition that unbalanced individuals often see deep into the heart of reality. These visions may rob them of solid ground.

((It is a mistake to think of demonic powers only in individual terms and not as belonging to corporate entities and institutional structures, be they political, economic or

religious. William Loader says, “Always understanding oppression in personal or psychological terms is a naïve way of looking at things.” Imperialism, nationalism and neo-colonialism, corporate greed and perverted religious systems could all be described as oppressive, if not demonic, with frightening destructive capacity.))

Today’s story concludes with the demons gone and the man clothed, in his right mind and sitting at the feet of Jesus, the posture of a follower/student. He begs to go with Jesus, but Jesus orders him to return to his home and declare how much God has done for him. This contrasts with the calling of the fishermen, Peter, James and John, who are told to drop their nets and to follow Jesus. In the logic of the story, Jesus sees that the healed man is now wonderfully empowered to spread the good news and reach more people in Gerasa than in Galilee. Some serve by staying behind.

Except for the pigs their herdsman, it is a happy ending. Nothing is perfect, but there is some balance here. What would it mean for us to stay where we are and proclaim how much God has done for us?

Luke 8:26-39 Then they arrived at the country of the Gerasenes, which is opposite Galilee. ²⁷As he stepped out on land, a man of the city who had demons met him. For a long time he had worn no clothes, and he did not live in a house but in the tombs. ²⁸When he saw Jesus, he fell down before him and shouted at the top of his voice, “What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I beg you, do not torment me”— ²⁹for Jesus had commanded the unclean spirit to come out of the man. (For many times it had seized him; he was kept under guard and bound with chains and shackles, but he would break the bonds and be driven by the demon into the wilds.) ³⁰Jesus then asked him, “What is your name?” He said, “Legion”; for many demons had entered him. ³¹They begged him not to order them to go back into the abyss. ³²Now there on the hillside a large herd of swine was feeding; and the demons begged Jesus to let them enter these. So he gave them permission. ³³Then the demons came out of the man and entered the swine, and the herd rushed down the steep bank into the lake and was drowned. ³⁴When the swineherds saw what had happened, they ran off and told it in the city and in the country. ³⁵Then people came out to see what had happened, and when they came to Jesus, they found the man from whom the demons had gone sitting at the feet of Jesus, clothed and in his right mind. And they were afraid. ³⁶Those who had seen it told them how the one who had been possessed by demons had been healed. ³⁷Then all the people of the surrounding country of the Gerasenes asked Jesus to leave them; for they were seized with great fear. So he got into the boat and returned. ³⁸The man from whom the demons had gone begged that he might be with him; but Jesus sent him away, saying, ³⁹“Return to your home, and declare how much God has done for you.” So he went away, proclaiming throughout the city how much Jesus had done for him.