

Sermon by Michael J. Hoyt
Glenshaw Presbyterian Church
12th Sunday in Ordinary Time
June 24, 2001

“Jesus Vs. The Demons”
Luke 8:26-39

On first hearing,
this story about a man with demons sounds a bit strange to our ears.
In the modern, scientific world,
 we have other explanations for the forces that torment us.
But after living with this story for a while,
I wonder if this biblical world of demons and demon-possession
 is really all that different from ours.
Is the experience of this demon-possessed man really all that foreign to us,
 or is it an experience we still know all too well in our world,
 but by other names?

Don't we know what it's like to be compelled, controlled, pushed around
 by forces beyond our control...from outside or even from within?
Forces we don't completely understand or know how to cope with?

The conflict between Jesus and these forces is intense in the gospels.
Jesus has no more stepped out of the boat in the land of the Gerasenes,
 when this demon-possessed man of the city meets him
 on the shore.

This man is completely undone.
He is isolated.
Cut off from every aspect of normal social life,
 he walks around without any clothes on.
Half the time he is incarcerated by the chains and shackles of the townspeople,
 the rest of the time he lives in a self-made prison,
 among the tombs.

You may know someone like this man,
 whose body is alive but whose spirit is dead,
 who lives a life of imprisonment,
 locked down by relentless torment.
Of course, you wouldn't have said they were demon-possessed.
We don't talk much these days about the forces of evil.
We have trivialized the demonic,
 thinking of demons as little red men
 with wings and horns on their heads, flying around,
 whispering temptations in our ears.
But that kind of demon is too easy to deal with, too easy to dismiss.

What about the demonic power of an addiction,
or some destructive habit that picks like a vulture at your soul?
What about the demon of domestic violence,
imprisoning its victims in shackles of fear and chains of intimidation?
What about the kind of mental illness that leads a mother
brutally to end the lives of her 5 children?
Can we really explain that with a clinical diagnosis?
What about the evil of racial hatred,
or any kind of prejudice against another one of God's beloved children
with whom we share this earth?
Or is there even something demonic about the American myth of success,
that lures us into a life of endless consumption and accumulation,
in the futile hope that just one more product, one more commodity,
and finally we'll be content...
but the contentment is always just out of reach.
In the face of these kinds of ruthless forces,
we might prefer a little red man with wings and horns.

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When Jesus steps onto the shore in the land of the Gerasenes
the struggle with the demonic powers is immediate and intense.
The demons have a death-grip around this man's neck,
and they are squeezing out his life and even his God-given identity.
We are not even told the man's name,
only the demon's.

But though the struggle between Jesus and the demons is intense,
the outcome is never in question.
From the moment of his arrival,
Jesus establishes his authority over this demon named Legion.
His first act on the shore is to command the demons to come out of the man.
The demons know they have to submit to the Son of the Most High God,
so they bargain with Jesus
and Jesus gives them permission
when they come out of the man
to enter a herd of swine feeding on the hillside
which promptly rushes down the hill, over a steep bank
and into the lake to be drowned.

Now when a man is healed and restored to his right mind,
reconciled to the community which had rejected him,
we have good cause to rejoice.
But something else happens here instead – Jesus gets kicked out of the country.

The reason is clear enough: the destruction of this swineherd
means that somebody's small business is going belly up!

It seems the liberating, restoring power of the gospel
 upsets the way the world of the Gerasenes is arranged,
which might lead us to wonder,
when Jesus steps onto our shore, what kind of struggle is about to ensue.
What are the things that we rely on that may have to go belly up
 on the way to restoration and wholeness and new life.

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For the past several years
I have been travelling to Atlanta for four weeks out of the year
 to go to school.
One of the places I frequently visit in Atlanta is a place called the Open Door.

The Open Door is an intentional Christian community
 that ministers to the homeless and to people in prison.
The community is based in an old boarding house on Ponce De Leon Ave,
 a main thoroughfare in Atlanta.

On this last trip, just before we moved to Pittsburgh,
I went to the Open Door on a Wednesday morning to serve breakfast
 and attend the worship service
 which happens out on the front steps and sidewalk of the house.
Many of the men who show up for breakfast
 look like I imagine the Gerasene demoniac to look.
There was a man there that day whose surely had suffered at least as much
 as the Gerasene demoniac.
Not only was he homeless,
 owning nothing but the clothes on his back,
 but he was also deaf
 and only able to communicate by writing,
 which was only partially legible,
 or by sign language which very few other people know
 especially on the streets in Atlanta.
His story is no doubt unimaginable to most middle-class people of privilege.

But through the ministry of the Open Door,
 Jesus had stepped onto the shore of this man's life.
And there on that city sidewalk on that Wednesday morning,
 this deaf homeless man
 stepped into the middle of the circle of worshipers,
 and while everyone watched in reverent silence,
 this man lifted up a prayer to God in sign-language.

Now I don't know sign language,
 but in that man's eyes I could see something that looked amazingly like
 deep gratitude to God.
I think that whatever demons may torment that man's life

they were surely, at that moment,
cast out into the road to be swept away by the cars and buses
that were whizzing by.
In that circle of Christian community,
this man became fully clothed and in his right mind
a beloved child of God.

It is no small part of this story
that many of the neighbors of the Open Door Community
on Ponce De Leon Avenue
are none too happy about the presence of a homeless shelter
in their neighborhood.
Homeless shelters are not very good for property values.
They would be just as happy if Jesus would leave their neighborhood,
or at least keep himself confined to the gothic sanctuaries
of every denomination that also line the Avenue.

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It is also no small part of the biblical story
that when the Gerasenes ask Jesus to leave them,
he does!
And the land of the Gerasenes would have been a land without Jesus,
except that now there lives a man there whose life has been changed.

And this man does what Jesus tells him to do.
He goes away proclaiming all that God has done for him.

I was at the Presbytery Office this week for a new minister orientation.
And Jim Mead,
the new executive presbyter,
challenged us as new pastors,
and challenged our churches to answer the question:
“Our city needs to hear about Jesus because...”
And also,
“Our city needs the church of Jesus Christ because...”

This is such a basic question for us to ask and answer.
But can we do it?
If someone pressed us, could we give an answer,
or at least the beginnings of an answer, to this question?

Are we going throughout the city
proclaiming how much Jesus has done for us?
Do we know why the world needs to hear about Jesus?
Perhaps one place to begin is by learning to recognize
and to name the demons
that have us under their spell.

Then perhaps we will see more clearly
all that Jesus has done
and all that Jesus can do for us and for our world.

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Today, we have in our community someone who has heard Jesus call
to go and declare.
Jesus has walked onto the shore of Anne Keller's world
and brought new life.
And now Anne is going, as Jesus has told her,
to proclaim all that God has done for her.

Today we commission her in the name of the One who overcomes evil
and restores us to wholeness.
Let us support her with our love and our prayer
as she receives Christ's commissioning
as a candidate for the Ministry of Word and Sacrament.