

Pastor Gregory P. Fryer
Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
6/23/2013, Pentecost 5C
Isaiah 65:1-9, Psalm 22:18-27, Galatians 3:23-29, Luke 8:26-39

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

³³Then the demons came out of the man and entered the swine, and the herd rushed down the steep bank into the lake and were drowned. (Luke 8:33, RSV)

Nowadays, whenever I think of this morning's story of the Gerasene demoniac, I find myself recalling a great line I heard in a lecture a couple years ago. It is a question. It is the perplexed cry of the farmer: "But what about my hogs?"¹

In this sermon, I mean to express sympathy for that farmer, to have lost his herd of pigs so suddenly. That's the first part. But then I mean to move on to a great gospel theme: The drama of our Lord's exorcisms is that they let a world under the control of the demons know that they have met their Conqueror.²

THE FARMER

Let's begin with the farmer. The first date that my wife Carol and I had was at the York County Fair, down in York County, PA. If you have ever been to a county fair or if you have lived on a dairy farm, then you might well know something about the affection the farmer can have for his animals. At the county fair, you can find farmers simply glowing with pride as they enter their animals into competition and show them off.

It was probably no exaggeration in last Sunday's story about King David and the prophet Nathan when Nathan described the poor man and his one little lamb:

...it used to eat of his morsel, and drink from his cup, and lie in his bosom, and it was like a daughter to him. (2 Samuel 12:3, RSV)

¹ The Rev. Fleming Rutledge, Episcopal priest and author, in her lecture "On Preaching the Lord Jesus Christ," Thursday, June 16, 2011, at the CCET Theology Conference at Loyola University, Baltimore, Maryland. She, in turn, says that she heard the question about the hogs in a sermon by Lutheran theologian Donald Juel.

² Fleming Rutledge, above, expressed this theme in her lecture.

I can well believe that the slaying of that lamb close to broke the heart of that poor man.

So, Carol and I went to the York Country Fair back when we were seminarians.

But a couple years later, when we were co-pastors of our first parish there in southern York County, we went to a bigger fair than the country fair. I mean we went to the Maryland State Fair. We did that, partly because we like fairs, but chiefly for the sake of a pig farmer in our parish. Fred loved his pigs. He was proud of his pigs. His day job was that of a tax preparer, and he prepared our taxes, but his true love was his farm and his pigs. Don't tell me that Fred would have looked on calmly if his pigs had up and jumped off a cliff. "But what about my hogs?"

Furthermore, in much of the world, the life of a farm animal is the difference between life and death for the farm family. Even small animals can make a difference. So, our Sunday School children do a great thing when they save up their money for the Heifer Project³, for example. Contributing a heifer or a sheep or goat or a flock of chicks or ducks can keep families around the world from starving.

So, it is no small thing to a farmer to watch a herd of pig jump off a cliff. And we can well have sympathy for the herdsman.

THE DEMONS HAVE MET THEIR MATCH

Let's move on now to the chief theme of this sermon: the story of the Gerasene demoniac is the story of the demons meeting their match—indeed, meeting their Conqueror.

Perhaps there is some small consolation for the farmer who lost his pigs in thinking that it is a whole lot better for the demons to have entered his pigs and been destroyed than for them to have entered *him*! Or to have entered the people of his village. For demons in people are awful! It is the very height of exasperation and condemnation to say of someone "That one is demonic!" It is close to saying that the person has lost his or her humanity and has become wild and dangerous both to self and to others.

When the Gerasene demoniac was possessed by the demon, what chance did he have? He lived "not in a house, but among the tombs," as if his natural kinship was with the dead, not the living, and that his destiny was nowhere but that sad place, the tomb. He was naked, he was lonely, he was out of his mind! When the townsfolk tried to restrain him, he broke the fetters and fled human community. The text says that he was "driven by the demon into the desert."

³ <https://secure1.heifer.org/gift-catalog?msource=KIK1I120184&gclid=CKvXlYvv8LcCFYUz4Aod0BIAJw>

The howling winds of the desert matched the howling winds in his head. He was driven hither and yon, with no wife, no friends, no children. He was a terror to the community and a danger to himself. The hatred of Satan for humanity was in full display in this poor man. The Satanic gloves were off. What happens to a man or a woman, a boy or a girl, who falls into madness and addictions and compulsions and is tossed around like a little boat on a raging sea could be seen in the poor Gerasene demoniac.

WHENCE THE DEMON?

Where did the demon come from—this demon who haunted and bedeviled the poor man? I am not a physician and so I cannot give a confident medical explanation of the man's plight. What is easier for me to do is simply to sympathize with the man and to imagine his loneliness and suffering.

And yet, I feel that it could be good for our souls to linger some with the question, "Whence the demon?" This is a solemn matter. Especially it is worthwhile to linger with the question to the extent that we ourselves bear some responsibility for the demon entering our lives. If in some manner or other, we have opened the door to the demon, then it is time to open it again and tell the demon to go, that the demon is no longer welcome.

Now, I am not entirely certain that the man himself in this morning's Gospel story bears responsibility for his demonic possession. I am not sure that he opened the door and welcome the evil spirit in. Sometimes people are so wounded by their childhood or by other experiences that it seems they had little chance except to grow up somehow deformed in their souls.

Do not think that possession by the demons is an ancient, bygone phenomenon. Satan has received a mortal blow in the resurrection of Jesus, but he is not dead yet, and while he thrashes around with his final bursts of evil, he can take up residence in the human soul, bit by bit, through his own clever mechanisms. Look around at our world, ponder the stories of murder and mayhem that seem to be increasing in our world, and shudder at the demons at work. There really is such a thing as "demon whiskey," "demon lust," "demon greed," "demon wrath." These unclean spirits can rob people of their souls, step by step, and their goal is always to hurt us. They might promise fun, even exhilaration, but their goal is death and suffering. Beware the demons. Try not to give them a crack into your life. And never be so tough on other people that you abuse them and cause them to shrink away from their full humanity and to become worse than the beasts.

It is telling about the demons that when they see Jesus, they recognize him as the Son of God and immediately start speaking of "torment":

“What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I beseech you, *do not torment me.*” (Luke 8:28, RSV)

Torment is exactly what the demon knows about. He has been tormenting the poor man and the people of the village. Now the thing he does is the very thing he fears. He fears torment.

That the demon *has to go* is clear. He has met Jesus. He has met his Conqueror. The only thing the demon can do is to plead for some more time. The destiny of the demons is “the abyss.” All this demon can do is beg to not be sent there immediately:

³¹And they begged him not to command them to depart into the abyss. (Luke 8:31, RSV)

One way or another, they cannot stay in this Gerasene demoniac, for the Great Physician of body and soul is present, and he means to save the poor man. So, the demons have to go. They have to get out of this world. So, they enter into the pigs, dash off the cliff, and drown. And that part of the world is suddenly better off.

The townsfolk come and immediately mark the difference:

³⁵Then people went out to see what had happened, and they came to Jesus, and 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. (Luke 8:35, RSV)

Why were they afraid? Because they knew that they were in the presence of God, which is an awesome thing. It was with these village folk as it had been in the story just before this one: the story of Jesus calming the storm on the sea. The disciples had not been frightened by the storm. They could have been frightened by the storm, but instead took that in stride as part of the natural way of things. What really frightened them was the *calming of the storm* by Jesus:

²⁴And they came to him, and awoke him, saying, Master, master, we perish. Then he arose, and rebuked the wind and the raging of the water: and they ceased, and there was a calm. ²⁵And he said unto them, Where is your faith? And they *being afraid* wondered, saying one to another, What manner of man is this! for he commandeth even the winds and water, and they obey him. (Luke 8:24, KJV)

Likewise with these village folks in the country of the Gerasenes: They have met God face to face, and naturally, they are afraid.

THE NEW JERUSALEM

The Bible has many lovely pictures of how things are going to end up. There is Isaiah's image of the peaceable kingdom, with the wolf and the lamb dwelling in peace. There is Jeremiah's image of the knowledge of the Lord filling to the very brim the human heart, with no room left over for sin. There is Revelation's image of the New Jerusalem, the streets of gold and God wiping away the tears from every eye.

But I like this simple picture too: a man who used to be out of his mind because of the demons sitting peaceful and calm before Jesus, who has set him free. Naturally the man wants to go with Jesus. But Jesus assures him that he is alright on his own. In fact, he gives him a mission: to try to draw others to Jesus.

Let me close by noting a lovely shift of language in the final verse of our Gospel Lesson. It is the verse about the mission in life which Jesus entrusts to the former demoniac. As I read it aloud, note the shift from the word "God" to the word "Jesus." Jesus says this to the man:

³⁹Return to your home, and declare how much *God* has done for you." And he went away, proclaiming throughout the whole city how much *Jesus* had done for him. (Luke 8:39, RSV)

In meeting Jesus, this man had met God. Jesus had saved and turned this man's life around, he can do the same for you and me if we will let him, and to him belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.