

“Letting Our Demons Go”  
June 19, 2022  
Scripture: Isaiah 65:1-9; Luke 8:26-39

Stories about Jesus’ encounters with demons are in three of the gospels, we don’t find them in the Gospel of John, and they all follow a pretty similar pattern. Upon meeting Jesus, the demon shouts and begs for Jesus not to hurt them, then Jesus commands them to be silent and casts them out. In this story the pattern is slightly expanded to include a brief conversation between Jesus and the demon, or as it turns out demons, before allowing them to inhabit a nearby herd of pigs, driving them to their destruction. In most of these stories, nearly all of them, we learn next to nothing about the person who is possessed. But again in this one we learn a little bit more.

This is someone who lives among the tombs; he’s been banished by his community because whatever has hold of him makes him uncontrollable. And we can imagine, if one demon is bad, a legion of them (that’s a reference, by the way, to the largest unit of the Roman army) must be much, much worse. It staggers the imagination to think about someone infected to that degree. It sounds more legendary than factual. And I would go so far as to say this story isn’t meant to be understood factually at all.

I’ve said before that I don’t believe demon possession happens. I don’t believe in supernatural forces taking control of people or animals or the weather or anything like that. I believe these stories are meant to be instructive; they’re essentially parables told to point us to deeper spiritual realities and not meant to be taken literally. And if that’s true, then we may want to look at this story a little differently.

Why is this man portrayed as completely cut off from his community? Is it possible this is what happens when someone fails or refuses to conform to social expectations? Was he seen as a physical threat or a social threat? I find it interesting that once he’s cured and all the “demons” are gone, the community isn’t relieved; they’re frightened. And how do we understand these demons, anyway? Are they attitudes and behaviors that go against the grain of society or could they be projections of the community’s worst traits onto this person, so he becomes their scapegoat?

I don’t think it’s possible to understand this man’s condition without understanding or at least examining the system of relationships that produced him. Every social system, every tapestry of relationships, is woven of many threads that, when brought together, can create a thing of beauty. But when certain of those threads are removed it creates a tear. The whole tapestry may survive, but now it has flaws, holes that can’t be mended unless the missing pieces are reintegrated somehow.

Our tendency in society is to exile those elements who threaten to erode tranquility. We demonize them by labeling them in various ways. And when circumstances start to change, when tolerance is broadened to include them, it can be frightening. At times that fear can be

overwhelming. For instance when the Black community in Tulsa, Oklahoma, began having financial success and gaining the respect they deserved back in 1921, the city became anxious. White business people and politicians began looking for any excuse to stop it. A Black man was accused of speaking inappropriately to a white woman, he was arrested and it wasn't long before mobs of white people wanted to take matters into their own hands. The result, ultimately, was a massacre of the Black population in Tulsa, burning down homes and businesses, the community hasn't recovered from to this day.

If we want to talk about demons working evil in a society, it seems to me the demons of bigotry and jealousy and fear were at work among that population. The fact is, we don't need to look to the supernatural to find the cause of evil in the world. We only need to look at ourselves, to look at all the demonic forces we carry within us. We see examples of that every day in the papers; we've recently lived through one expression of evil right here in Buffalo. While on the one hand the person who committed that atrocity is responsible for their own actions, on the other that person is also a product of a society we've all had a hand in creating. Part of the fear from the townspeople may have been losing their scapegoat. So long as that man was out there roaming the tombs they didn't need to look anywhere else for evil.

What Jesus does in casting out those demons is force the community to look at itself. That's why the man needs to stay. So long as he is among them, healed, they can't avoid examining their own lives and the society they've created. We all have demons we need to let go. But they don't originate outside of us from some abyss; we create them ourselves when we refuse to follow the way of compassion and justice.

The Jewish Bible doesn't really talk about demons. What makes God angry is failure to keep covenant, the choices that are made that abandon the way of Torah. So, when Isaiah portrays God berating this group of Israelites, you notice they are responsible for their bad choices. There's no question who's at fault, no outside influence forcing them to do things they don't mean to do. Instead we find people who are practicing strange rituals they probably imported from Babylon. They've cut themselves off from the community and elevated themselves above everyone else. Yet, even so God is willing to preserve them. God promises not to completely destroy them again, but offers a vision a little later in that section of a new heaven and new earth, where no one is exploited and everyone has access to all they need to live abundantly.

Just as Jesus won't give up on someone seemingly filled with demons or the community that keeps him that way, God will not give up on Israel. What these stories tell us is we are not beyond hope. No matter what we read in the papers or see in the news, or even what we find within ourselves when we dare to look, there still is hope for us. We're meant for something more than bigotry and fear and hatred. But to discover it we must let our demons go. We can't keep looking in other places for the cause of our troubles. We have to look within ourselves and let the demons of antisemitism and white supremacy and homophobia and xenophobia go so we can build the society of justice and compassion God desires us to become.

That's a lot of work we have to do. And a lot of listening to stories of injustice and cruelty we need to hear. We can't live anymore in the illusion that evil in the world is somehow

caused by forces out of our control. Jesus calls us to take responsibility even if it scares us. Like the townspeople around the man who was healed, we're invited to cooperate with what God is doing among us, to cooperate with the healing Jesus brings. As Bishop Desmond Tutu once said, "without God we cannot; without us God will not." Letting our demons go requires opening ourselves up to honest and fearless examination, what people in recovery call a "fearless moral inventory."

Can we do that? Do we have the courage it takes to hear the ways we fall short without becoming defensive, without chasing away the messenger? I think we do. It's been done in other places. We have the capacity to live honestly and face our demons so we can name them and let them go. All it takes is a willingness to find healing, a desire to be restored. That's what Jesus offers us while we wander among the tombs; a chance to unburden ourselves, to finally be freed of the demonic forces we've allowed to occupy us. The time for healing is now. New life can be ours if we have the courage to take it.

Amen