

Pentecost Four

June 20, 2010

O God be in my mouth as I speak for you and fill this place with your great grace, that we may leave this place less of what we used to be and more of what we ought to be, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

Return to your home and declare how much God has done for you.

Happy Father's Day to all of the Dads this morning...

As I was working on my sermon this past week, I struggled to find a connection between Father's Day and demon possession.

This can be quite a challenge since our lectionary doesn't always cooperate with secular holiday observances.

But after giving it some further thought, I think I have found a connection between my dad and Jesus' encounter with the Gerasenes demoniac. So hold onto your seats....

Many of you are aware that my father is a psychiatrist.

At this point, I can see a few of you nodding your heads, probably saying to yourselves...oh so that explains a lot. That topic though is probably for another sermon.

Most scientifically minded folks like my dad today attribute possession stories in the New Testament to some form of mental illness.

Their reasoning goes like this; in Jesus' day people didn't really understand mental illnesses.

Because they couldn't understand these maladies and the strange behavior that went along with it, they described these folks as demon possessed like our fellow this morning who is naked hanging out in the graveyard outside the city.

If only the man had had better treatment, a caring committed physician like my father, he wouldn't have suffered from such torment.

While this explanation appeals to our rational age, I think it misses the whole point of why God sent Jesus into the world.

Time and Time again, the Gospels remind us that Jesus is on a mission to do battle with Satan and the demonic forces of our fallen world.

Remember Jesus' forty days in the desert facing temptation, turn these stones to bread, throw yourself down from this steeple, or better yet I will give you this world if you fall down and worship me.

The devil never seemed to be far from Jesus' side and our Lord understood that this world was in bondage to powers that could corrupt and destroy us.

In fact if you study Holy Scripture, Israel's story as a people was always about the struggle between slavery and freedom.

This story applied not only to Passover narrative when the Hebrews left Egypt and crossed the Red Sea.

But to Jesus' own day, the Romans were just as hated in Jesus' day as other occupiers from Israel's past like Babylonians.

And if we are honest with ourselves the folks in Jesus' time knew that human life wasn't just about a struggle against political oppression but also one that was waged for the welfare of their souls.

Jesus knew that people in every age struggle with the same temptations and sins: pride, greed, lust, and the human desire for power and control.

This is why Jesus announces early in Luke's Gospel when he reads from Isaiah, that the spirit of the Lord is upon him and that God has anointed him to preach good news to the people, release to the captive, and sight to the blind.

Now we don't know much about the past of this crazy man that Jesus confronts at the tombs once he steps off the boat.

But it is clear from our story that this man was someone who was a captive to forces he couldn't control and he desperately longs to hear that good news.

It is also interesting to note that Luke's story of this frightening encounter occurs just after Jesus has quieted a storm on the sea of galilee.

The outline of that story should be familiar. Jesus is asleep in the boat on the lake, the disciples wake him up during the storm and he calms the seas with a word.

Having been awakened from a good rest, he says to his disciples, "Where is your faith?"

The irony should not be lost on any of us as our Lord goes from a storm on the lake to a storm on the shore as this crazy naked lunatic confronts him, challenging him.

Luke I think wants to emphasize that the world is a dangerous place and if you don't perish on a boat, there was a good a chance you might be struck down by the demon man living by the shore.

Yet, it is Jesus' presence, the power of his very being, that changes the life of the man that he is confronting.

Much ink has spilled in books and also in Hollywood movies like the Exorcist, about the name that is given by the demon, Legion.

And in the ancient Middle East, names were important way to have power or control over a spirit.

But the word Legion also, described a regiment of Roman soldiers. And Roman soldiers enjoyed eating pork. So hopefully you see where I am going with this part of the story.

Luke's listeners would have appreciated the irony of this Legion of demons/soldiers turning into a herd of pigs, and rushing over the edge of a cliff into water. Luke cleverly expresses what most folks wanted the Romans to do, Go and Jump into a lake.

As a storyteller Luke also does a wonderful job of contrasting the difference between our first meeting with the crazy naked man and the difference when the town folks come out to see what has happened.

The people from town find the man sitting at the feet of Jesus, wearing clothes and in his right mind.

Just as the storm was quieted by Jesus' command, the townspeople discover that Jesus has quieted the storms that raged within this man's soul.

And scripture tells us they were afraid. Why do you suppose they were so frightened? Was it because this Jesus had sent demons into the pigs and they drowned?

Were they frightened because this man, whom they were used to keeping chained up, was now free and ready to rejoin their community?

Jesus power had turned their world upside down.

Salvation, freedom, peace of mind had come to this man but instead of seeing the joy of the moment, the people were caught up in their fear, just like the disciples in the boat on the lake.

Luke wants us to understand that when we invite God into our lives, we have to be willing to let God turn our lives upside down.

Remember change can be hard, and even Jesus got chased out of his hometown the first time he gave a sermon.

The folks that came from the town, the disciples in the boat on the lake are not much different from you and me.

They seem reluctant to embrace the peace and freedom that Christ offers.

They were comfortable with the old way of doing things even if those old ways were destructive to others.

Our world today is not much different. There is a lot of power available, power that can hurt, isolate, torment and destroy in all sorts of ways.

The way we describe these forces whether it as demons, schizophrenics or storm gods, indifferent natural laws, or just human greed and pride remind us there are always storms swirling around us.

At the end of the day though as Christians, it doesn't matter what lines up against us. Look the Gerasene Demoniac had more to worry about than his demons.

He was a pariah, cut off from family, friends, community and relationships from all those connections that make us human and give meaning to our lives.

By the time Jesus got through with him, our demoniac was on the other side of all those fears.

He was in his right mind, the crazy naked guy was now dressed and Jesus told him to go home, back to home he didn't have when our story started.

The man was given the fullness of his life back and that was the great victory that Jesus had over forces that confronted him.

Of course, the man wants to stay with Jesus but Jesus tells him,

Return to your home, and declare how much God has done for you.

And Jesus gives us the same challenge today. We can be tempted to run off, ignoring the good news we have to share or we can turn away from Christ and act from our fears.

But we must remember that the love that Jesus brings, the love that Jesus gives us to share, is stronger and more powerful than the very worst that this world can throw at us.

And it is never too late for us to get down on our knees and let Jesus take our demons and throw them over a cliff.

Return home, Christ says to us, and let the world know how much God has done for you and for me.