

**Naming Our Demons**  
***Close Encounters of the Jesus Kind Series***  
**Proper 7C      June 20, 2010**  
**Based on Luke 8:26-39**

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Throughout the summer, the appointed Bible stories all have Jesus encountering people who are not considered the “in” crowd. They are people who society considers odd, immoral, worthless. When we encounter such people, we tend to want to walk the other way. Jesus, however, makes it a point to interact with such people, and he reaches out to them and shares the inclusive love of God.

In today’s gospel, Jesus encounters a dreadfully strange man possessed by a bunch of demons. I’m glad we dismissed the children out of the room for Children’s Church because this is scary stuff! He’s the classic monster. The man is out of his mind. He runs around naked. He lives in a cemetery. He’s aggressive enough to break free from any shackles and chains people place on him.

Demonic possession isn’t something we Lutherans talk about much. Our Lutheran hymnal doesn’t have a liturgy for exorcism. I didn’t have a demonology class in seminary. So what in the world are we to do with this text? The gospel story today is so far “out there” that it is all too easy for us to dismiss it, to say “this story is not about me,” it doesn’t have anything to say about my life. And I say, “Not so fast!”

Dare I say it: We all wrestle with demons. We live in a culture that suffers from “legions” of demons. We wrestle with demons of greed, addiction, financial debt, depression. Maybe your demon comes in the form of a bottle or food. There’s the demon of laziness; the demon of mixed-up priorities; the demon of not being able to forgive others.

Our demons torment us by encouraging us to over-extend ourselves or to procrastinate. We wrestle with demons of fear, insecurity, self-worth, hopelessness. Our demons silence us from saying what needs to be said but then cheer us on when we gossip about others. Yes, we all wrestle with demons.

As we read the stories of faith in the Bible, we catch glimpses of what demons with which they wrestled. Cain fought demons that led him to kill his brother, Abel. When God tells Moses to go to Pharaoh and say, “Let my people go,” Moses’ demon of being terrified to speak in public reveals its nasty face.

King David’s demon of believing he was not accountable to anyone led him to torment Bathsheba and ultimately kill her husband. When the angel of the Lord came to Mary to inform her she would birth the Savior of the world, her demons of

insecurity and unbelief revealed themselves as she came up with a whole laundry list of excuses: “I’m too young; I’m not married...”

To be human means to wrestle with demons. We know what torments our lives day in and day out. We feel ashamed or embarrassed about the demons that possess us, and so we don’t talk about them. Those closest to us might know what our demons are, but for the rest of the world, we become experts at making others believe that we have everything under control. But all the while, demons rage inside us causing us shame, pain and embarrassment.

Jesus comes along and the first thing he demands of us is to name our demons – out loud – for the whole world to hear. Notice, in the gospel today, as Jesus encounters the demon-possessed man from Gerasene, the first thing he says is, “What is your name?” Jesus demands that we come clean and name our demons. In religious language, we call it “confessing our sins.”

When it comes to confession, all too often we simply go through the motions. We read the words of the weekly confession without seriously considering the demons that rage inside us. Instead of honestly naming our demons to Jesus, all too often we choose to remain quiet one more time. We deceive ourselves into thinking that we have everything under control, that we can handle it, it’s not really a problem.

It’s a tragic move on our part. Why? Because, as we see in the gospel today, if we are willing and able to name our demons, Jesus has the power and the authority to cast out the demons that seize our lives. Our fear causes us to distance ourselves from the very One who can cure us. We must be willing to swallow our guilt, our shame, and our fears in order to entrust our whole lives into the hands of Jesus who promises to cast out everything that attempts to separate us from the love and peace of God.

In one of the beloved “Peanuts” cartoons, Snoopy wakes up one morning realizing that his dog house is directly beneath a huge icicle. He becomes paralyzed with fear. He can’t bring himself to come out of his doghouse.

After a number of unsuccessful attempts to rescue Snoopy, Charlie Brown calls the humane society. They advise him to use Snoopy’s favorite food – something he can’t resist – to coax him out. Snoopy is finally saved by a pizza.

I ask you this day: What is your icicle? What is it in your life that has a way of paralyzing you with fear? What demons are you facing this day? It is shocking news from your doctor? It is news that your job might be in jeopardy, or that you fear bankruptcy? Is it a family crisis you are dealing with? Is it your need to be liked by every one, or your fear of failure? Maybe your demon is the worry you carry for the well-being of your grown children, or perhaps your fear of death.

Whatever holds us captive, whatever blinds us to seeing the abundant, peace-filled life that is available through Jesus Christ, Jesus asks us to be bold this day and to name it. Say it out loud, Jesus says, believing that no matter what it is, Jesus has the ability to cast out that demon in our life, offering us the peace that God desires for us. Christ is more powerful than our meanest demon. The demons of our lives are no match against the strong Word of God.

Just as Charlie Brown coaxed Snoopy out of his doghouse with food, so Jesus comes to us this day and coaxes us out of our brokenness and shame by offering us food – not pizza, but the very bread of life – Christ’s own body and blood here at this table. The life Jesus sacrificially offers us upon the cross of Calvary coaxes us out of our sin-filled lives and leads us to a place where there is freedom from all that holds us captive.

Yes, fear is very real. The demons that torment us are very real. But the Bible assures us that they will not have the last word in our lives. For there is something more powerful still: his name is Jesus Christ.

Jesus has the power to take away that which binds and torments us and gives us in return the glorious peace of mind that comes from remembering who we are, a “child of God,” named and claimed by God in the waters of Holy Baptism. We are his, and nothing in this world or in the world to come will ever be able to separate us from our heavenly Father.

Whatever demons we face, the good news is that there is hope in Jesus.

When we continue on in the gospel story, we discover that once the man with many demons is healed, the people find him sitting calmly and respectfully at the feet of Jesus, listening to him talk about God’s love. He is fully clothed and in his right mind.

You would think that the people’s response would be, “Thanks be to God!” One would think that the people would be overjoyed that this troubled man has been healed and restored back to physical and emotional health. But that’s not what happens at all.

The people aren’t happy or relieved. The Bible says they are *all afraid*.

Our pride can get the best of us. You would think that the other people – having just seen the power that Jesus has over evil and sin – would say, “Heal me, too, Jesus! Just as you have restored that man to his right mind, help me face the sin in *my* life. Please, Jesus, cast out the demons in my life, too!” But that’s not what happens. Instead, they tell Jesus to go home, to leave them be.

We all know that it is easier to keep on living as we always have rather than to change. Yeah, there's that dirty word – CHANGE! We would rather control our lives by living by our own ways rather than choosing to venture out in faith, because faith always brings with it some unfamiliar territory, some uncertainty. Faith always bring with it change.

There's a lot of risk involved when we choose to venture out in faith. We would rather just play it safe and continue on as we always have. We would rather remain comfortable in our own ways rather than listening to what God has in mind for us. When the people saw that Jesus had healed the demon-possessed man, they just couldn't open themselves up to receive that same kind of healing. They weren't willing to surrender their lives to Jesus so that he could deliver them from their own demons.

The more we dig into this gospel story, the closer it strikes to home. We are all tormented by demons. And our natural inclination is to tell Jesus to go away and leave us alone. It's too difficult to talk about. We don't want to face our sin and brokenness. We are content to just plaster a smile on our face and pretend that we have it all under control.

But Jesus knows how lost we really are. Jesus knows that on our own, we will never be able to free ourselves from the hold our demons have upon us. And so Jesus forces the subject by making us name our demons, to admit our sinfulness, to humble ourselves and to fess up to how lost we really are. That, Jesus says, is the only way we will find true peace and salvation.

So the question becomes: do we surrender our pride and name our demons, or do we order Jesus to go away, to leave us alone?

Let's not miss the good news in the gospel today. When Jesus comes near to that demon-possessed man, all of a sudden his problems vanish. Jesus has the power to heal his life. Jesus is stronger than all of the demons.

That holds true for our lives as well. When Jesus draws near to us – as he will in the Holy Communion meal today – Jesus doesn't come to destroy us or to judge us. Jesus comes to heal us and to offer us an incredible life filled with peace and blessings.

There's something else I don't want us to miss in this story. Notice, after Jesus heals the demon-possessed man, Jesus tells him to go and to tell everyone what God has done. And that's exactly what the man does. He goes and tells.

I pray that we will do the same. I pray that when Jesus does something powerful in our lives – like casting out the demons that torment us – we will tell others what Christ has done. Go and tell people that Jesus has come near and desires to heal us and give us hope.

So don't order Jesus to go home. Invite him to cure all of the demons in your life. Be bold in naming your demons and remind them that they will not have the last word. For something stronger is at work in your life: the saving power of God.

Psalm 91 boldly proclaims this promise: God says, "If you'll hold on to me for dear life, I'll get you out of any trouble. I'll give you the best of care if you'll only get to know and trust me. Call me and I'll answer; I'll be at your side in bad times. I'll rescue you, then throw you a party. I'll give you a long life, give you the drink of salvation!"

Thanks be to God! Amen