

June 19, 2022
Luke 8:26-39

Pentecost 2
Pastor Jeff Laustsen

“Deliver Us from Evil”

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

During my high school years, a movie was released that caused a great deal of excitement and controversy. Its release was all over the news; it broke all records at the box office, with people lining up around the block to get into the theatre. It was debated on talk shows, Sunday news programs, and on religious television shows. It was a movie the likes of which has never been seen on the motion picture screen. The movie was *The Exorcist*.

My friends and I gave in to our curiosity and decided to go see the movie; so, we lined up outside the Dunellen Theatre one evening and made our way into a packed auditorium. While it was one of my more memorable movie-going experiences, I cannot say that it was one of my most enjoyable – in fact, I hated the movie. Afterward, we went back to our car and spent the next several minutes spelling out the ways in which all of us despised what we had seen on the screen. Memories of that evening at the movies have stayed with me for a long time.

That experience with *The Exorcist* remains with me when I read biblical passages like today’s Gospel lesson from Luke, in which Jesus performs an exorcism on a man possessed by demons. To prevent my mind from wandering back to that not-so-pleasant evening in the Dunellen Theatre, I began by looking into the background of this story and the sensitivities of Jewish piety in Jesus’ day. The presence of pigs in the story reminds the reader that swine were considered unclean and abhorrent by observant Jews; the Torah teaches that “*the pig, because it divides the hoof but does not chew the cud, is unclean to you. You shall not eat their meat, and you shall not touch their carcasses.*” (Deuteronomy 14:8). Tombs were also a source of uncleanness, and in Jewish areas they were whitewashed so that one might not come into contact with a tomb accidentally. Demons were believed to roam in desolate places seeking refuge, but, knowing the name of the demon gave the exorcist control over them. Understanding the context of the story helps us to hear the Gospel message even if our minds wander to a certain movie that we may or may not have enjoyed.

The story begins with Luke's reporting that Jesus and his disciples "*arrived at the country of the Gerasenes, which is opposite Galilee.*" (Luke 8:26). Gerasa was located @fifty kilometres south of the Sea of Galilee in the Transjordan and was a leading city of the Decapolis. This was Gentile territory, the only record in Luke's Gospel of Jesus ministering in a place that was primarily Gentile. As soon as Jesus steps on land in the area that is not only across the Sea of Galilee but across the social border that separated Jews and Gentiles, he is met by "*a man of the city who had demons ... For a long time he had worn no clothes, and he did not live in a house but in the tombs*" (8:27). While some had difficulty seeing or understanding Jesus' true identity, the demon that possesses this man knows fully who Jesus is; we are told that "*when he saw Jesus, he fell down before him and shouted at the top of his voice, 'What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God?'*" (8:28). The unclean spirit begs Jesus not to torment it, for Jesus "*had commanded the unclean spirit to come out of the man*" (8:29). As Jesus had previously demonstrated that he is master over the forces of nature (having calmed the storm on their crossing of the Sea of Galilee when he "*rebuked the wind and the raging waves; they ceased, and there was calm.*" – 8:24), Jesus now demonstrates that he is also master over demonic spirits; "*the destructive power of evil is unmasked, and Jesus rises as victor over the devil's deceptions.*" (Alan Culpepper). Jesus' command for the unclean spirits to come out of the man is an act of compassion for the man because of all he had suffered under the power of the demon; Luke reports that "*many times it had ceased him; he was kept under guard and bound with chains and shackles, but we would break the bonds and be driven by the demon into the wilds.*" Jesus first demonstrates his power over the demon by requiring it to divulge its name, which is Legion, "*for many demons had entered him*" (8:30). The name "Legion" indicates that number and power of the demons that possessed the man; a Roman legion was composed of five or six thousand men, indicated that Jesus is engaged in a formidable spiritual battle. Having surrendered the name, the unclean spirits now realize that Jesus has the upper hand in this battle; so "*they begged him not to order them back into the abyss*" (8:31). The abyss was the netherworld, the abode of spirit powers, the dead, imprisoned spirits, and the place of Satan's prison:

- "Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father." – Philippians 2:9-11.
- "But the righteousness that comes from faith says, 'Do not say in your heart, 'Who will ascend into heaven?'' (that is, to bring Christ down) or 'Who will descend into the abyss?'' (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead).'" –

Romans 10:6-7.

- “For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God. He was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit, in which he also went and made a proclamation to the spirits in prison ...” – 1 Peter 3:18-19.

The demons did not want to be sent back to the abyss, either because it was for them a prison or because they knew that the abyss was not beyond the power of Christ. Jesus’ power is no less effective even in an area where demons were most numerous and most destructive.

Knowing that they have been defeated, the demons negotiate their fate and Jesus allows them to enter “*a large herd of swine*” that was feeding nearby, another reminder that this incident takes place in Gentile territory; “*Jesus engages the location of the Gerasenes on his own (his disciples are not mentioned anywhere in the account), in a place that anyone in his right mind would avoid.*” (Jeannine K. Brown). After receiving permission from Jesus, “*the demons came out of the man and entered the swine, and the herd rushed down the steep bank into the lake and was drowned*” (8:33). The fate of the pigs shows that justice had prevailed all around: the man had been delivered from the demons’ torment, the unclean herd had been destroyed, the demons had gotten what they wanted, and in the end, they had been destroyed along with the pigs. Jesus has outwitted the devil.

- “The demons that wanted most to avoid being sent into the abyss had been drowned in the lake. When it gets its way, evil is always destructive and ultimately self-destructive.” – Culpepper.

The exorcism is confirmed by witnesses who see the man restored to peace and normalcy: “*they found the man from whom the demons had gone sitting at the feet of Jesus, clothed and in his right mind.*” (8:35). As one who now sits at the feet of Jesus, the man ranks with many of his followers who sat in the same place before their Lord:

- “She stood behind him at his feet, weeping, and began to bathe his feet with her tears and to dry them with her hair.” – 7:38.
- “Just then there came a man named Jairus, a leader of the synagogue. He fell at Jesus’ feet and begged him to come to his house, for he had an only daughter, about twelve years old, who was dying.” – 8:41-42.
- “[Martha] had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord’s feet and listened to what he was saying.” – 10:39.

- “[The leper] prostrated himself at Jesus’ feet and thanked him. And he was a Samaritan.” – 17:16.

Luke reports a universal response to the exorcism from “all the people”; they recognize the mystery and power of what had taken place, but they cannot make a place for it or accommodate their lives to it. The community had apparently learned to live with demonic forces, isolating and controlling them. But now the power of God for good comes to their community and disturbs a way of life they had come to accept, a reminder that *“even when it is for good, power that can neither be calculated nor managed is frightening.”* (Fred Craddock). There is also the factor of economic loss with the destruction of the herd of swine. The Gerasene people are not praising God that the man was healed; they are counting the cost and finding it to be too much. Both of these factors help explain why *“all the people of the surrounding country of the Gerasenes asked Jesus to leave them; for they were seized with great fear. So, he got into the boat and returned.”* (8:37). Their reaction is in stark contrast to the Galilean Jews who earlier had begged Jesus to stay with them: *“And the crowds were looking for him; and when they reached him, they wanted to prevent him from leaving them.”* (4:42). *“It seems the Gentile lands are not yet ready for the good news of the reign of the one true God.”* (Brown).

But there is one Gerasene who does not want Jesus to leave: *“the man from whom the demons had gone begged that he might be with him”* (8:38). But instead of inviting him to become one of his followers, Jesus sends the man home with a commission to *“return to your home, and declare how much God has done for you”* (8:39). As the Samaritan woman at the well returned to her community to invite them to *“come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?”* (John 4:29), the man who has been liberated from bondage to the power of the devil returns to his people to begin the mission to the Gentiles that all of Jesus disciples will share when they are commissioned to *“make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit”* (Matthew 28:19). The man who experienced the liberating power of the Word of God in Jesus Christ now becomes a messenger to share this liberating word with others: *“So he went away, proclaiming throughout the city how much Jesus had done for him.”* (8:39).

- The healed demoniac sits at the feet of Jesus, revealing his new discipleship status. This newest disciple becomes a witness to Jesus and his power, for although the man begs to return with Jesus, Jesus sends him back to his home to proclaim what God has done for him. Jesus not only heals this individual;

he also leaves a witness behind for everyone who has initially rejected him.”
– Brown.

While many of the elements of this story sound strange to our modern ears and may conger up images from notorious movies, the message of this Gospel lesson is one of hope and liberation for all who “*sit in darkness and in the shadow of death*” (Luke 1:79). Our Lord who freed this Gentile man from his bondage to demonic forces also teaches his disciples to pray that God might “*deliver us from evil.*” (Matthew 6:13). In the *Small Catechism*, Martin Luther teaches the meaning of this petition in the Lord’s Prayer:

- “We ask in this prayer, as in a summary, that our Father in heaven may deliver us from all kinds of evil – affecting body or soul, property or reputation – and at last, when our final hour comes, may grant us a blessed end and take us by grace from this valley of tears to himself in heaven.”

In a sermon from 1531, Luther encouraged his congregation that “*if you are in great tribulation, the Lord’s Prayer will be sweet to you and you will gladly pray it from the bottom of your heart.*” In his most famous hymn, we join with Luther and generations of faithful Christians in proclaiming that “*though hordes of devils fill the land all threatening to devour us, we tremble not, we trust God’s will: they cannot overpower us.*” (“A Mighty Fortress Is Our God,” ELW Hymn 504). We confess our faith in Jesus Christ our Lord, ruler of heaven and earth, who has “*purchased and freed me from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil, not with gold or silver but with his holy, precious blood and his innocent suffering and death.*” In our baptism into Christ’s death and resurrection, we live in the sure and certain hope that “*neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.*” (Romans 8:38-39).

- “As Leonardo Boff notes, ‘The reality encompassed in the Lord’s Prayer is not a pretty picture but one of heavy conflict. Here the kingdom of God confronts the kingdom of Satan.’ The Lord’s Prayer describes a world in which neither the naïve supernaturalism of the fundamentalist nor the cheery optimism of the liberal is adequate. It is a world of holocausts and genocidal massacres, of growing embittered underclasses and homelessness in the midst of wealthy cities, of blasphemies and lies. In such a universe, the Lord’s Prayer both alerts us to the profound and all-pervasive reality of evil, and assures us of

God's care and protection in the midst of such a world." – Patricia Wilson-Kastner.

While we may dismiss the portrayal of the demonic in both *The Exorcist* and in the story of demon-possessed swine hurling themselves off cliffs, we know that evil is real and actively present in our world. Evil is present in anything that seeks to destroy what God has created, in anything that seeks to separate what our Lord came to unite, that seeks to deny us that fullness of God's abundant blessing that our gracious Lord desires all of us to enjoy. Evil is present when someone urges us to hate someone who is different from us, to look at "others" as inferior to those who are "one of us," and when we are encouraged to divide ourselves into warring factions rather than seeing in every person the unique child of God for whom Christ died. Evil exists in violence, hatred, animosity, abuse, and any other thoughts and actions that destroy and tear down rather than build up. Evil is present in anything and anyone that seeks to put itself in the place of God and have its will accomplished rather than praying that "*thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.*" But when we are baptized in Christ Jesus, we boldly and publicly renounce all the forces of evil that would seek to separate us from the love of God that is ours in our Lord and Saviour: we renounce "*the devil and all the forces that defy God ... the powers of this world that rebel against God ... [and] the ways of sin that draw you from God*" (ELW Holy Baptism). In Holy Baptism we bind unto ourselves the strong name of the Trinity, knowing that no matter what forces of evil may be arrayed against us, we live in assurance that "*Christ be with me, Christ within me, Christ behind me, Christ before me, Christ beside me, Christ to win me, Christ to comfort and restore me.*" (ELW Hymn 450).

- "The underlying assumption of the Lord's Prayer is that our relationship with God empowers and frees us. We are able to make choices and to be responsible. Indeed, if we pray the Prayer that Jesus tells us, as children of Abba, we will faithfully love and serve God and actively resist evil. As Boff writes, 'Any genuine liberation, from the Christian standpoint, starts with a deep encounter with God that moves us to committed action.'" – Wilson-Kastner.

The Exorcist will never be one of my favourite movies, and I must admit that some elements in today's Gospel lesson are strange to my ears; but the power of evil is real and dangerous in this and every generation. But our faith in Jesus Christ gives us the assurance that no matter how great the forces of darkness may be or how dire the situation, because Jesus Christ is Lord of all we live in that sure and certain hope that

even *“though life be wrenched away, they cannot win the day. This kingdom’s ours forever!”*

Amen.