

Isaiah 65:1-9
Psalm 22: 18-27
Galatians 3:23-29
Luke 8: 26-39

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Year C

The Demons Among Us

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart, be acceptable to thee, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer. AMEN

What's not to love about a scripture that unites vegans and bacon-lovers alike with a story about a thousand demonic pigs diving off a cliff into a lake? That question was posed by the irreverent Reverend Nadia Bolz -Weber—who else?

Truth be told, this is a text I've tried to avoid. All those suicidal pigs floating in a lake and a chatty demon named Legion. But if you're preaching on the second Sunday after Pentecost Year C, there's no escape.

But beneath this freaky and creepy passage is real wisdom and profound truth. The truth is that we are all familiar with demonic possession.

Nadia Bolz-Weber has written extensively about her demons: addiction and depression. Her depression was such a frequent visitor in her 20s that she named her "Francis"—whom she described as looking emaciated in a torn vintage nightgown with smeared lipstick. She and Francis both "liked booze, unstable boyfriends and self-destruction." Writes Weber:

She was a terrible roommate. She kept the place filthy and always told me really devastating things about myself. For some reason when she lived with me, I was no longer able to do simple things like shop for groceries. One day, my mother realized that Francis was not ever moving out and suggested I go talk to a nice lady about evicting her...She's a bit of a dope

fiend, Francis, but it ends up there is one drug that she doesn't like. It's called Wellbutrin. Two weeks after I started taking it, the bitch was gone.

Our text today is one of the most relatable in the New Testament. We all have, or will, battle our own demons—the things that name us, claim us, and shame us. Money, anxiety, depression, alcohol, drugs, food, sex, work, mental illness, low self-esteem...the list goes on....

“If we expand the definition of ‘possession’ to include everything that conspires to keep us dead when God wants us alive, writes Debie Thomas, in *Journey with Jesus*, “the story of the Gerasene demoniac is not an ancient oddity, it is the air we breathe.”

We find our demons terrifying and isolating. If you have ever loved or lived closely with someone who is mentally ill, you know full well that demons also take prisoners, hold hostages.

But the takeaway from this text is that demons are afraid of Jesus. “They try to get us to stay away from people who may remind us how loved we are,” writes Bolz-Weber.

The naked demoniac who lived amidst the tombs, approached Jesus not asking for help or healing, but to be left alone: “Don't torment me.”

And what does Jesus do? Jesus asked him his name, which changed everything, as it always does as I was reminded recently outside my local CVS. A woman with a shopping basket, few teeth, with a wide smile was asking for food or money. I brought her food and candy—and turns out we both love Reese's Peanut Butter Cups-- I asked her name. Cassandra. “But you can call me Cassie.” It changed everything and connected us in intimacy, not strangeness, even if only for a moment.

In baptism we're named and claimed as God's. Our name is the first and purest statement of who we are.

The demoniac's name was "Legion" because as Luke explains, he was tormented by many demons.

"The truth is, what ails us as human beings is Legion," writes Debie Thomas, who continues:

The evil that haunts us has many faces, many names. We are all—every one of us—vulnerable to forces that seek to take us over, to bind our mouths, to take away our true names, and to separate us from God and from each other.

One of the faces of the evil that haunts us white supremacy—a collective demon that possesses us all whether we admit it, deny it, or ignore it-- a privilege unavailable to black and brown people who are forced to reckon with its cruelty and impact.

Our addiction to guns is another collective evil that haunts and us – and when fueled by white supremacy-- often pulls the trigger as it did in the shooting at Tops Friendly Market in Buffalo last month, killing ten. The insanity of "Critical Race Theory" or the "Great Replacement Theory" are like Ku Klux Klan robes—a way to cloak, hide, and accelerate the lethal reality of hate.

The demonic knows he has no power before Jesus, and falling at his feet, begs to be allowed to enter the herd of pigs who hurl themselves over the cliff. Let's not be distracted by this bizarre twist and lose track of what happens next.

The man is cured, clothed and sitting at Jesus's feet when the townspeople arrive after hearing the stunning news. But what do they do? Exactly the opposite of what one might think. They're confronted of a power they can't imagine or even comprehend. The truth is impossible to bear and as Luke said "They were seized with great fear" and asked Jesus to leave. So he gets ready to get back into his boat and shove off from shore. Some thanks.

Truth has the power to set us free, if we can tolerate believing it—as Liz Cheney will soon find out in November from Wyoming voters.

The newly healed man pleads with Jesus to accompany him. But Jesus refuses. “Return to your home, and declare how much God has done for you,” which he did. It is as if to say continue your healing in the community where you came from among the same people that hated you and kept you in chains.

“Isn’t this just like Jesus?” asks Debie Thomas:

To choose the very people we consider the most unholy, the most unredeemable, the most repulsive and unworthy—and commission them to teach us the Gospel? That is God all over.

Today we honor and celebrate Juneteenth which marked the effective end of slavery in this country and yet, and yet— we all know the evil of slavery that haunted and possessed this nation from its founding until 1865, did not really end there. The engines that powered slavery fueled white supremacy which enshrined systemic racism and the demons that system continues to produce are well, legion.

“Know Jesus and change the world,” is the motto of our Diocese and it is in that knowing that our hope lies. Because to truly know Jesus is to live in life abundant as God’s beloved children.

It is as simple and powerful as that. Our demons make us dead inside. Our collective demons are threatening to deliver a death blow to our democracy.

But demons are terrified of Jesus because they’re powerless before him— and we’re only powerless when we fail to claim the power bestowed on us in the radical act of baptism—which we forget is so much more than christening gowns and the inevitable brunch that follows.

As our reading from Galatians reminded us today: “As many of you were baptized in Christ, you have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female—and we might add gay or straight or trans or non-binary—all of you are one with Christ Jesus.”

Which means, according to that irreverent reverend Bolz-Weber: “You dear people of God are clothed with the one whom demons fear. Claim it. And tell those demons to piss off. In the name of Jesus, AMEN.