

The First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
“Living in Ordinary Time: Demonized”
Rev. Amy Morgan
June 19, 2016

Psalm 42

Luke 8:26-39

Maybe it started out small. He said the wrong thing, dressed the wrong way, acted a little different. And he was teased, then ridiculed, maybe even bullied a little.

But eventually his behavior, his dress, his manner fell so far outside the norm that he was declared to be possessed by demons.

Now, I love it when I get to preach on the demon stories. It immediately conjures up images of The Exorcist and people start to worry that this will end with pea soup.

But demons are so much more interesting than Hollywood makes them out to be. Especially the demons in this story. First-century cosmology attributed a wide range of maladies to demon possession, from what we would today diagnose as epilepsy or mental illness, to run-of-the-mill bad luck or ill temper. The power that demons held was supernatural. All that couldn't be explained or controlled could be blamed on demons. Demons embodied the corporate fears of the community.

And so, in today's story we encounter a man with demons, a man who is demonized by the fears of his community.

But what is entirely unique about this demonization is the scale. Now remember, in Jesus' day, a legion was a very specific military term, a unit of the army made up of as many as six thousand men. This is not a general term for more than a few. This man is possessed by thousands of demons, thousands of fears. We don't see this anywhere else in scripture.

This isn't epilepsy or mental illness or a behavioral or medical disorder. This man has been demonized. His community has taken all they can't explain or control, all they can't fix or cure, and they have focused it on this one person. When he comes too close to town, they lock him in chains. When he breaks loose, those demons of fear run him out of town and he lives among the dead.

But when Jesus steps onto their shoreline, things are about to change.

Because the demons of fear immediately recognize Jesus for what he is: the one with the authority to command the wind and the waves, the one with the power to destroy the forces of sin and death, the one with a love great enough to cast out fear. And that is just what he does. He casts out the demons of fear this man has carried for so long.

The demons of fear enter a herd of swine, and the terrorized pigs drown themselves in the lake.

And just like that, Jesus robs the Gerasene community of their demoniac. When the one who was savage and unsafe is suddenly clothed and in his right mind, when he suddenly looks and acts just like everybody else, the people of the community are filled with fear. Their demons have been released from the one they had demonized, and they have returned to their rightful owners. The scripture tells us twice that the people are afraid, and they tell Jesus to get out of town.

We are all possessed by demons of fear right now. Every last one of us. It doesn't matter if our fears are reasonable or unreasonable. We are fearful.

And we are faced with a choice. We can be like the man who was demonized, throwing ourselves at Jesus' feet in our naked vulnerability. Or we can be like the Geresenes, casting our fears onto someone else, finding someone else to demonize.

For most of our country's history, we've chosen the latter. We've demonized the English, the South (or the North, depending on which side of the Mason/Dixon line you're from), the Irish, the Jews, the Germans, the Japanese, the blacks, the Hispanics, the homosexuals, the transgender, the Muslims. The demons of fear just keep moving from place to place to place.

But we can make a different choice. We can choose trust instead of fear.

A child who is frightened of monsters under the bed can sleep because he trusts his parents to protect him. People who live in neighborhoods where they know and trust their neighbors are not afraid to let their children roam freely. Citizens who trust their government are not afraid of their elected leaders, and they can work together for the well-being of all people.

The man who trusted Jesus was freed from the demons of fear that plagued him. He met Jesus as soon as he stepped off the boat, fell at his feet, naked and vulnerable, while the rest of the community looked on with suspicion. When the rest of the community became infected with fear, they compounded their ailment by sending Jesus away, filled with mistrust.

Mind you, we're not expecting Jesus to be the great fixer, making our world safer, more prosperous, more peaceful. We are trusting the hope of Jesus Christ to cast out the despair we are all feeling. We are trusting the love of Jesus Christ to cast out the hate that we see building. We are trusting Jesus to cast out the demon of fear that separates us from God and neighbor.

The only cure for fear is trust. Trust in God and in the goodness of God's image reflected in humanity. Trust in God's promises for a world made new.

This isn't a blind trust, not at all, quite the opposite. We have every reason to trust. We trust in a God who rescued the people of Israel from slavery in Egypt. We trust in a God who gave us a plan for living in peace and righteousness. We trust in a God who sent prophets to lead us in that plan. We trust in a God who chose to become one of us, to know the pain of being human, the grief of losing a loved one to death, the ugliness of the demon of fear, the horror of execution. We trust in a God with the power to command the wind and the waves and to cast out fear. We trust in a God with the power to destroy sin and death forever.

That isn't blind trust. We have every reason to trust.

When events like the one this week occur, and it sickens me that we can even say that, that we even have other tragedies to compare this to, but each time this happens, we wonder where God is in all of this. Skepticism about God's goodness and God's power run high. And the church has done a poor job of responding to that skepticism. We've struggled to know what our role is in the face of devastation or what message we have to share. And that is truly tragic.

Because we have a message of hope, a word of comfort, and a commitment to justice that is unique and powerful and vital.

We, as the church, are the body of Christ. We are Jesus on the shoreline. And falling at our feet are all those who are being demonized right now. And watching from a distance are all those who distrust the church.

We are called to follow Christ, to step out of the boat, and cast out fear.

And not everyone is going to like it when we do that.

Because when Jesus steps out of the boat, we might build a relationship with our Muslim neighbors, and we won't be able to fear them and blame them for all of the horrific acts of violence carried out in the name of their peaceful religion.

When Jesus steps out of the boat, we might have to empathize with the depth and breadth of discrimination and hatred experienced by the LGBT community, and we won't be able to fear that who they are in any way undermines anyone's moral or religious values.

When Jesus steps out of the boat, we might develop compassion for the plight of people seeking work or refuge in our country, and we won't be able to fear that they will take all our jobs and blame them for the state of our economy.

When Jesus steps out of the boat, we might have to look at our whole culture's addiction to violence instead of pinning all our fears on the NRA and the gun-rights lobby or on gun-control advocates.

When Jesus steps out of the boat, we might not be able to blame Trump or Clinton or any other politician for our collective greed, bigotry, and dishonesty. We might just all have to own that's who we are.

We are humans. And we are possessed by fear. And the only way we know how to deal with that demon is to cast it onto somebody else.

And so when Jesus steps onto our shoreline, when the church steps out of the boat, people more likely than not will ask him, ask us, to leave. Because once fear is cast out, once the demoniac is dressed and in his right mind, once the enemy looks and acts just like everybody else, we have to deal with the only thing we rightly have to fear: ourselves.

We have to look at our own darkness, our own inhumanity, our own greed and apathy. All those demons that take up residence in each one of us. John Calvin was clear that humanity, at its core, is totally depraved. Not one person or group or institution or ideology. All of us sin and fall short of the glory of God, all of us participate in systems of injustice, all of us have to take responsibility for our own sin and the sin of our society. We don't get to pin it on someone or something else. Demonization does not cure fear. These are our demons.

And if we can own that, then there is hope. Because Jesus is on our shores today. Jesus is ready to cast out fear. Jesus is ready to remake this world, to put us in our right minds, to clothe us in love and justice and peace. If only we will trust. Trust him. Trust one another.

And as the church, our challenge is to step out of the boat and use the power given to us as the body of Christ in the world. The power to cast out the demons of fear, the power to speak the truth in love, the power to bring hope in a darkened world. Lying at our feet are the demonized from all sides of the political spectrum. We are Everybody's Church. And we will not allow any group to be demonized.

And we will send those who have been freed from fear to go and proclaim all that God has done for them. It is not enough to come here each week, to feel refreshed, renewed, re-affirmed. We can't hop in the boat with Jesus and stay there. We are sent back to all those who are still demonized by fear to share our trust, our hope, our peace.

Let us go out and cast out the demons of fear. Go and be hope. Be light. Be comfort and peace. Return to your homes, and declare how much God has done for you.

Amen.