

**Proper 7, Year C**

6/19/2016

[Isaiah 65:1-9](#)[Psalm 22:18-27](#)[Galatians 3:23-29](#)[Luke 8:26-39](#)**Wonder-Working Power**

Most of our personal experiences with exorcism involve hearing stories like the one we just heard from the Gospel of Luke, or from watching the famous 1970s movie *The Exorcist*. Beyond the spinning heads and pea soup projectiles of such horror films and the occasional exorcism by Jesus on Sunday mornings, demon possession is not something we believe we encounter on a daily basis. Most of us understand “demon possession” today as being part of a mental health issue, something best dealt with by mental health professionals who employ counseling and medication rather than rites of exorcism.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless there are actually instructions regarding exorcism in one of the Episcopal Church’s liturgical books. In *The Book of Occasional Services* there is a page with the heading “Concerning Exorcism.” The two short paragraphs on this page can be summed up in three words for those who think exorcism might be in order in a given situation: call the Bishop.

That sounds like good advice to me. The fact that such an action would be reserved to the bishop’s pastoral discretion is reflective of the way those earliest Christians handled such things. It reflects a certain healthy suspicion common to a

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<sup>1</sup> R. Alan Culpepper, *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, ed. Leander E. Keck, *Luke, John* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 188.

reasoning people about something like demon possession. Yet it also implies that as Christians we do believe that there are powers and forces beyond our temporal realm, and that there is a spiritual dimension to the difficulties and calamities we face. Jesus did, after all, identify the exorcising of demons as one of the signs of his authority and the coming of the kingdom of God.<sup>2</sup> It is only by Jesus' power and authority that an exorcism of any kind can occur. That is precisely what Luke is trying to show us about Jesus in his eighth chapter: the power and authority of Jesus. The important part is not the demons, but Jesus' power.

The story just before the exorcism is of the disciples' fear at being caught in a storm on the Sea of Galilee, and of Jesus calming the wind and the waves. The stories that follow the exorcism are of Jesus resuscitating a man's daughter and healing a woman with a 12-year hemorrhage. All of these stories illustrate Jesus' authority and power: power over nature, power over demons, power over disease, power over death itself. Like the old Baptist hymn says, "There is power, power, wonder-working power" in Jesus. Jesus' power obliterates the power of sin and death in our world!

Think about what happens to the demon-possessed man in the story. He is stripped of his clothes, walking around naked and homeless in a cemetery; he is stripped of his name and his individuality to the point that he feels like a mob is at war within him; he is stripped of his dignity and control over his life by the demons that haunt him. He is an outcast from society, a society that only wants to bind him further and keep him quiet and out of sight. He's lost all control, he is

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<sup>2</sup> Episcopal Church, *The Book of Occasional Services 2003* (New York: Church Publishing, 2003), 174.

devoid of any power over his demons. Have you ever felt like you'd lost your individuality or control over your life to a "struggle of conflicting forces . . . as though a Roman legion was at war within"? Felt controlled by depression, anxiety, or some compulsive behavior?<sup>3</sup> Talk to anyone who has ever experienced addiction of any kind and perhaps they can tell you about demons. Talk to anyone who has ever been abused and maybe they can give you a glimpse into the life of the man in Luke's story.

If we are to take Luke seriously and to believe what he says about Jesus—that Jesus has power beyond anything that can exercise control over us—then wherever we find the power to take back control over our lives, we discover the divine love of God in Jesus Christ. The demons that haunt us are named, and stripped of whatever power they hold in the face of the true power of love. This happens for people every day through doctors and counselors, through AA and other support groups, through families and friends who are there to comfort and to help carry the load, and through the Church that nourishes our faith and shows us the truth: that the ultimate power to overcome our demons comes from one source which is the divine love of Christ at work through many different forms of support around us.

This wonder-working power doesn't just work on internal struggles, but also on external struggles. There is a strange clue to this in Luke's story that bears some attention. That whole bit about the man's demons being driven into the hogs seems a little weird and raises some questions. Why did Jesus grant the demons'

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<sup>3</sup> Culpepper, 188.

request? Is he showing them mercy? What about the poor herdsmen? Their livelihood has been taken away!

It is important, here, to remember who Luke's principle audience would have been in the first century—Jews and Jewish Christian converts. The Law of Moses commands that Jews are not allowed to eat pork or even come in contact with pigs because they are considered unclean. When we were on pilgrimage in the Holy Land we were in places populated primarily by Jews and Muslims, neither of whom can eat pork. Pork isn't on the menu in the Holy Land. When we stepped through security in Newark on our way home Wednesday morning the first scent that several of us caught with much delight from the airport restaurants was the delicious smell of frying bacon. It smelled wonderful, and almost foreign since we'd smelled nothing like it for two weeks. Thanks be to God that, as Paul teaches us, we are no longer subject to the Law of Moses but to Christ through faith, otherwise there would be no bacon for breakfast, no pork chops on the grill this afternoon for Father's Day, and no more Saints' games come Fall—footballs are, after all, made out of pigskin!

One Bible scholar points out that the destruction of the pigs in the story would have said to a Jew or Jewish Christian convert 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 had outwitted the devil. The demons that wanted most to avoid being sent into the abyss had drowned in the

[sea, a symbol of chaos and disorder like the abyss]. When it gets its way, evil is always destructive and ultimately self-destructive.”<sup>4</sup>

It is the power of the divine love that brings justice to the struggles of our lives and our circumstances, the power of the divine that exorcises demons of every kind. Yet, that does not mean that experiences of love and justice are always pleasant, happy experiences. Look at the swineherds who lost their livelihood, or the townspeople who ask Jesus to go away out of fear. When we participate in systems that are unjust, or treat others in ways that are unreflective of God’s will for the world, then when love and justice do come to town we may find ourselves feeling as if we have lost something. We may experience a feeling of judgment. When God’s kingdom comes in its fullness there will be only love and justice which also means upheaval by the destruction of hate and injustice. I am reminded of the work Covenant House has been doing to protect and assist young, at-risk, and vulnerable women in area strip clubs. They are preyed upon by pimps, drug-dealers, human traffickers, and are subject to generally unsafe work environments. One might say the demons they face are legion. The attempts to change certain laws surrounding the clubs, or to call for enforcement of other existing laws may seem like a no-brainer to you and me. For the club owners it is a direct threat to their livelihood, and they have fought back. Like the swineherds of Gerasa who lost their flocks,, these efforts of justice do not feel to them to be just.

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<sup>4</sup> Culpepper, 187.

Think of the vision of judgment in the book of Revelation. Before the author tells us at the climax of the book that God is joining heaven and earth and wiping away every tear, there is a great upheaval involving all of creation. You can't make breakfast on a new day in the kingdom of God without cracking a few eggs, slaughtering a few pigs. Maybe that's why those people by the sea were afraid and asked Jesus to leave. Maybe what they were thinking as they looked at the drowned pigs and the demon-possessed man now clothed and in his right mind at Jesus' feet was, "If this guy can bring about that kind of reversal, then on the other side of my encounter with him what might be different about me?"

In a few minutes we will actually pray an exorcistic prayer. You pray this prayer often, though you may not realize it, and it's particularly appropriate for us on Father's Day. In the Lord's Prayer we pray that our Heavenly Father will "deliver us from evil." Anytime we pray those words in this prayer we pray for the exorcism of our own demons, and the renewal of God's world according to God's will. What is God's will? Well, the Bible says it's that all should be clothed in Christ, all should be healed, all should be made whole, for all are one in Christ Jesus; and that in finding ourselves renewed we are called to take our part in God's work of renewal, and to go and tell others what the power of the divine love in Jesus Christ has done and is doing for us.

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