

June 20, 2010
Lectionary 12
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**GRACE AND PEACE BE UNTO YOU FROM GOD OUR FATHER
AND THE LORD OUR SAVIOR, JESUS THE CHRIST. AMEN.**

Given our presuppositions about reality, our Gospel lesson for today is weird. Let me count its' weird elements: 1) It is an exorcism story – that is weird in itself; 2) there is an apparently naked, deranged man who lives in a cemetery; 3) there are demons – lots of them; 4) and there are the pigs that drown in a lake. I doubt that even Stephen King could come up with a short story of only four paragraphs with all of those elements in it. It's weird.

So if this weird little story is to help us, the first thing we have to do is stop fighting the text. Our world view does not mesh with this story. For the story to help us, we have to hear it with the same understandings the first Christians had. From that understanding, we may see our connection to the story. Those first Christians were Jews who believed Jesus was the promised Messiah, crucified and raised from the dead, who brought them God's liberty from all that would enslave them. Their world-view was that of the ancient, pre-scientific world and, as Jews, they accepted the sensitivities of Jewish piety. Pigs were religiously unclean, polluted and abhorrent. Pigs were also associated with the pollution of the Gentiles who both raised pigs and ate them. Tombs were another source of religious pollution, which is why in Jewish territory tombs were painted white so that Jews might not accidentally touch them.

Demons were real. They believed demons lived in desolate, religiously polluted places, like cemeteries. They thought that knowing a demon's name gave an exorcist power over that demon. That assumption, by the way, highlighted the power and authority of Jesus. When Jesus asked, "*What is your name,*" he was not asking for the man's name. He was seeking the names of the demons and, through the man, they replied, "*legion.*" That is most likely a reference to the Roman army, a brutal reality those first Christians knew well. A Roman legion had between 5,000 to 6,000 men in it, so the point is the man was possessed by so many demons that one could not possibly know all their names. Furthermore, just like a Roman legion, the combined power of the demons in the man was immense – gigantic! At that point, an ordinary exorcist would have turned and run for his life.

The demons however, recognized Jesus for who he really was which is ironic, at the least, because that very morning the disciples had witnessed Jesus calm a storm on the Sea of Galilee and had said: "*Who is this?*" They didn't get it. The demons did. They pleaded with Jesus not to send them "*into the abyss,*" which was thought to be the place where disobedient spirits were imprisoned. So the demons negotiated an agreement with Jesus to let them enter the pigs instead. That the pigs then stampeded and drowned in the lake would have been thought by any Jew as being only right and proper. The unclean herd had been destroyed, as it should be. The demons had been tricked into thinking they were escaping and instead died with the pigs. The man was delivered from the torment of the demons', the Gentile swineherds were prevented from raising pigs in Jewish territory, and Jesus had outwitted the devil. Justice had prevailed – a clean sweep.

For those first Christians, this story reinforced their belief in Jesus' victory over the demonic forces of life – and there is our connection to the story. When we confront malevolent, impersonal forces, don't we too know the power of demons? Have we not felt at times that we are powerless when faced by impersonal forces that can wreck our lives? Economists, for example, define a recession as a curative process for the over-production of goods and services, but that is not how a person who loses their job experiences it. Or, don't you think the folks confronting the oil gushing up in the Gulf of Mexico know what a demon is? There are all kinds of situations and experiences we can describe as facing a demon or as having a demon.

So we share with those first Christians the sense of helplessness before destructive and impersonal force. However, we can also share with them the confidence that God has conquered all that threatens us and gives us peace. That God gives us peace even in the face of that which threatens our very existence is the promise of this story. Just as the man was given peace, so then those first Christians believed they would be given peace and so we, too, believe we will be given peace – or, more accurately, that we have been given peace, that we are being given peace and that we will be given peace.

I cannot prove any of that to you, but I can give examples that show God's peace in people's lives. For instance, there is the woman I knew while on my internship. She was paralyzed from her neck down, but she was serene. I asked her once why she was not bitter. "Mike," she said, "when I consider the promises of God, how can I be bitter?" She had God's peace when most people would not have expected it.

I have a friend who worked on a children's ward at the University of Chicago Hospital while pursuing a Doctor of Ministry degree in Pastoral Counseling. He told me of meeting a little 12-year old girl who faced death from brain cancer. He asked her what death is. "Death," she said, is "God's victory over what doctors cannot conquer." Twelve years old. She had peace while dying.

I know a man whose world fell apart when his company eliminated his job. He and his wife had just bought their dream home. Their mortgage was almost twice as big as it had been before. Their youngest child was in her first year of college. Absolute disaster stared them in the face. Early one dark morning, my friend said he prayed: "God, there isn't anything I can do to change what has happened to us. Show me the way, Lord. Show me the way." He said that a sense of peace came over him that he has never lost.

Can't we all think of how God has brought peace to us or to those we know or love, even when external reality says that should not be the case? It can't be true – but it is.

It is very much like a hymn in our Book of Worship:

*Peace, to soothe our bitter woes, God in Christ on us bestows; ...
Peace be with you, full and free, now and through eternity.*

That is what this weird story about a man possessed by a legion of demons tells us. Trust Christ. You will find peace.

So be it, for you and for me.

**THE PEACE OF GOD WHICH PASSES ALL UNDERSTANDING,
KEEP YOUR HEARTS AND MINDS THROUGH CHRIST JESUS, OUR LORD. AMEN.**