

God Can Cast it Out!

King of Glory Lutheran Church
Year C: Pentecost 2: Luke 8:26-38
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This is not a simple story of God's healing. It challenges us to reflect upon systems of oppression in our neighbor's lives and ours. Jesus can conquer all the demons. We might fear the life He alone can bring. But salvation is available!

What today is holding you back from living the life that God desires for you? What is it? Is there something, or was there something in your past possessing you from all the goodness and peace God brings?

They tried to control this man – they bound him with chains and shackles. But there was nothing that could hold down the demons that held him. He is living naked and vulnerable, an isolated existence in a place of death, the cemetery. Picture that in your minds' eye for just a moment. See this man running around, out of his mind, controlled by the legion of demonic spirits living within.

As St. Luke writes the story, hearers would have heard the language referencing other human powers that have been at work in this region of the Geresene. Legion is an army word – meaning literally six thousand Roman soldiers – Rome being the occupying power.

“According to Josephus, during the late 60s CE, toward the end of the Jewish revolt, the Roman general Vespasian sent soldiers to retake Gerasa (*Jewish War*, IV,ix,1). The Romans killed a thousand young men, imprisoned their families, burned the city, and then attacked villages throughout the region. Many of those buried in Gerasene tombs had been slaughtered by Roman legions.”

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Furthermore, a pig was the emblem of Legio 10th Fretensis who participated in the siege and destruction of Jerusalem, and the reconquering of Palestine. It would have been on coins and other everyday objects. For Jews who regarded pigs as unclean, Jesus decision to allow the legion of demons to enter a swine herd, would have been a great choice!

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This story isn't simply a healing story about how good God is...this story pushes us to consider God's power to retake all the dark places and occupying powers in people's lives. In our lives.

If you've been following the story of NXIVM out of New York City, it has details to make our toes curl. Women joined what they thought was a self-help group, only to become sex slaves. It spanned two decades and three countries. The charismatic power of one man who created a cult of money and women. Women, people living vulnerable, isolated and in terror in the graveyards of their own lives happens today!

What about Syrian refugees fleeing the violence of their own home countries? Thousands are now living in tent cities on the border of Turkey. Their own government has killed brothers and sisters, husbands and wives. The possession of homes and businesses has been taken right out from under their feet.

What could we say of the Rohingya Muslims, enslaved children in forced labor, or the Palestinian Christians living under occupation with only a few hours of electricity and small amounts of water each day? What could we say of migrant workers who take jobs in this country, that Caucasians will never take? What could we say of our own government forcing children apart from their parents to prove a point? Occupying powers are alive and well in our world creating devastating memories, torturous lives and in possession of minds, bodies and spirits.

We know that there are massive systems of oppression that are beyond our limited power to fix or influence in significant ways. We do what we are able. Pray. Write letters. Make phone calls. Study and understand the complexities of issues and countries. Yet, if this story shows us anything, it demonstrates that there is nowhere God is not willing to go and no one God is not willing to be with in their times of incredible pain and isolation. God conquers darkness. God brings freedom and salvation.

Which includes you and me. And so hear the questions again. What today is holding you back from living the life that God desires for you? What is it? Is there something possessing you from all the goodness and peace God brings?

Are you yet struggling with memories from a war? They come in the dark of night when eyes are shut. Are you fighting an illness that seems always to be just around the corner waiting to catch you when your guard is down, or you are caring for a person with illness? Is there old emotional family business that keeps creeping up,

interfering with a marriage or other relationships? Is it a habit that just clings so closely it's difficult to know how to shake it? Maybe it's a grief that though years old, brings pain at any moment of the day. Or retirement has you questioning identity and talents that once were your bread and butter.

We may not be refugees or political prisoners, but there are memories and stories and narratives in our heads that can overtake our identities as we fight to come into God's light of love and grace.

You know what it is for you. I know what threatens to possess me and fights for power in my life. How do we fight it? How do we hold that darkness at bay? How do we allow God to work a powerful work in us? (Ok, retired engineers, here is a list for you. Not 3 points though...more than that!)

First – we recognize it is God's work to do in us, not ours. We come before God, trusting in God's grace and mercy. We live only by God's grace. God knows and understands our pain, our past and who or what is holding us hostage. Furthermore God already has power over it. Jesus' sovereignty was known by the demon before the demon even spoke! "We know who you are, Son of the Most High God! Don't torture me! We beg you not to send us into the abyss!" Legion knew the power of the Almighty. Trust that God can do an impossible work in you.

Secondly – give yourself grace. God does. Because God knows our stories, we don't have to pretend or bring any false pretense before the Lord. We simply get to come and be honest. Like that old prayer:

Dear God, So far today, I've done ok. I haven't gossiped or lost my temper. I haven't been greedy, crabby, mean, nasty, selfish, or overindulgent. And I'm very grateful for that. But dear God, in a few minutes I'm gonna get out of bed, and then I'm probably gonna need a lot more help. Amen.

Everyone struggles! Everyone has hurt. No one is perfect and God is a loving God of grace. Give yourself grace as well.

Thirdly – pray. Be honest with God about the situation. "Lord, I don't know how to fix this. I'm not even certain why it happens. I feel vulnerable, embarrassed, ashamed, guilty, confused (or whatever you feel!). Please God, guide me to your light of understanding. Grant me your hope that can hold me tighter than this thing in my life.

Fourth – fight fear. The demon possessed man first begged Jesus to leave him alone. The people who found the man clothed and in his right mind were terrified of Jesus. They got so scared of this one who could cast out demons – so much so they begged Jesus to leave!

When we're trying to make change in our lives, or change in our family systems or change in organizations, fear is a normal reaction. We might get scared trying to leave that which is familiar. We don't know what we don't know. We know what the tombs look like but is the grass really greener? Yet... we know God. God is for us and not against us. So fight fear.

Fifth – bring others in your circle. Everybody needs 12 people in their support system. Who is a confidant? Who can hold you accountable? Your hair stylist, car mechanic, postman, doctor, therapist, friend, and fun neighbor you always tease. 12 people. Find them. Invite them in and don't isolate. We need others around us who will help fight whatever is holding us back.

People of God – whoever or whatever is occupying our minds, spirits and bodies, God can control. God can heal. God can move us forward in life. Do not despair. Do not give in and do not fear. Come and worship, just like the healed demoniac! Amen.