

If you were here one or both of the last two Sundays, you heard the questions I asked and the promises made when a child is baptized and when youth are confirmed as members of this church. The first question I ask of parents during a baptism is:

Do you promise, by the grace of God, to be Christ's disciples and to teach your child by your own example and witness: to follow in the way of our Lord, to resist evil, to show justice and love, to witness to the work and Word of God?

To become members of the church, I begin with these questions.

Do you desire to affirm your baptism into the faith and family of Jesus Christ?

Do you renounce the powers of evil and desire the freedom of new life in Christ?

Do you promise, by the grace of God, to be Christ's disciple, to resist oppression and evil, to show love and justice, and to witness to the work and word of Jesus Christ as best you are able?

It is said that when Martin Luther, the leader of the Protestant Reformation, felt oppressed by voices tempting him to do something wrong or overwhelmed by deeds of evil around him, he would take courage by shouting: "I am baptized!" In this way, he grounded his confidence in God's powerful presence and his place in the Christian family through his baptism with water and the Spirit. I think that I prefer those words to: "Get thee behind me, Satan!"

Jesus' saving of the man possessed by demons in the country of Gerasene, may seem centuries away from us. But as is the case with Scripture, when we take a closer look, God **is** still speaking through this gospel story at the right time, just when we need to hear it. And that's NOW,

The image of evil certainly arises when something horrific happens like the recent tragedies and violence in Orlando and in England. People in Jesus' time and some today might say that such perpetrators are possessed by demonic forces.

We do talk about wrestling with our inner demons, which can take control of us, hatred and fear, self-righteousness and revenge, depression and rage have the power to drive some over the edge, and others to do things that they, that we, wouldn't normally do. Was the mass shooter driven over the edge by his own inner demons in a clash between his sexual and religious identities? Did he deceive himself into believing his rage was political rather than personal?

Commentator Elaine Heath writes: "Every city has its Gerasenes." Every city, every town, every neighborhood has not only individuals who are lost, troubled and even dangerous, but also communities of people who act out of fear and hostility. (1)

As a faith community, we can reflect together on the ways in which this gospel story urges us to be confident in God's call for new life, and God's determined action for the restoration of individuals and communities.

Two aspects of this story especially strike me at this time: the restoration of an individual's identity, and the fearful response from the community.

We hear that Jesus and his disciples travel outside Jewish territory, into the country of the Gerasenes, which was opposite Galilee. A bold and risky step into "alien" territory. Immediately, "a man of the city who had demons" comes to Jesus; he is naked and lives in the tombs, in a solitary place of death, not life. This is his identity on the outside, from society's point of view. In addition, we learn that he often escapes from the guard on watch and the shackles with which the townspeople try to keep him chained.

When Jesus asks him his name, he says only that his name is "Legion," which means "a multitude." His individual identity is lost somewhere in the noise of different, demanding voices inside and out. Rev. David Lose writes: "he has ceased being a self, an individual, a person. Hence he spends his days raving alone in the wilderness, a danger to himself and others, separated from his community and even himself." (2)

Have you ever been overwhelmed—or have you known someone who has been overwhelmed-- by voices shouting from inside and out telling you what you should do, criticizing you or driving you to a lonely and even desperate place? We're always seeking to understand and to live into our true identity. Ever had an identity crisis in a small, medium or big way? I have had one big one, in my thirties, when I wrestled with who I was apart from my family of origin, when I needed to discern which teachings and values would guide my life. My teenage rebellion and self-differentiation came about two decades late! But it was really through this difficult time of self-examination that I came into my own as an adult woman.

Once again, a poem by Mary Oliver expresses beautifully experiences with which we are all familiar. The poem is entitled: "The Journey"

*One day you finally knew / what you had to do, and began,
though the voices around you / kept shouting
their bad advice—though the whole house/ began to tremble
and you felt the old tug/ at your ankles.
"Mend my life!" / each voice cried.*

*But you didn't stop./ You knew what you had to do,
though the wind pried / with its stiff fingers/ at the very foundations,
though their melancholy/ was terrible.
It was already late/ enough, and a wild night,
and the road full of fallen/ branches and stones.*

*But little by little, / as you left their voices behind,
the stars began to burn/ through the sheets of clouds,
and there was a new voice/ which you slowly/ recognized as you own,
that kept you company / as you strode deeper and deeper
into the world, / determined to do, / the only thing you could do—
determined to save / the only life you could save.*

The beauty and joy of this gospel story is that the man with the demons knows that he cannot save himself, so he goes looking for Jesus. He shows up. His demons even call Jesus “Son of the Most High God.” This man needs someone who can reflect back to him his worth as a human being who can be restored to new life. The beauty and joy of this story lies in the fact that Jesus doesn’t run away or put the man back in chains, but instead helps him with all his power. God is with us, God always shows up, no matter who we are or where we find ourselves.

Miracles do happen every day, through the power of compassion and faith, in the midst of obstacles and even danger. It is the power upon which Martin Luther called when he said: “I am baptized!” It is the power of drawing from our all our God-given resources to offer support and care for our neighbors, for ourselves, and yes, for those whom we consider enemies. Yes, we have to show up too for one another.

When the townspeople come out to see what’s happened, they find the man “sitting at the feet of Jesus, clothed and in his right mind.” Now he is a person, a valued, beloved child of God. But then we hear: “And they were afraid. Then all the people of the surrounding country of the Gerasenes asked Jesus to leave them; for they were seized with great fear.” Why are they afraid? Shouldn’t they be rejoicing and celebrating? Are they afraid that Jesus is some kind of sorcerer? Are they terrified by a transformation that is beyond their comprehension and even imagining?

Sometimes we stay with what is familiar, even if it isn’t a good thing. Unexpected change can be frightening! I mean, if a wild demoniac can become right in his mind, then who knows what could happen next? Jesus’ disruptive words and actions signaled the dramatic in-breaking of God’s realm in the here and now. Scary. Awesome. Amazing.

And there’s more, probably the most beautiful and wondrous aspect of this story. The man is identified as “the man from whom the demons had gone.” That is not enough, however; he begs to go with Jesus. But Jesus sends him away, saying “Return to your home, and declare how much God has done for you.” *To your home!* The man has a home now, a community to which he must return, for those who are afraid and distrustful need to hear the good news of salvation, that is, the healing and wholeness to which God calls everyone.

“So he went away, proclaiming throughout the city how much Jesus had done for him.” Now he will be identified as “the man who proclaims in his community how much God in Jesus has done for him.” Ah, a witness—and a disciple in the making! Once lost but now restored, he can be as Christ to others, seeking to save them from the demons of fear and hatred, with the help of God. His is a crucial and challenging call.

And so is ours. Therefore, I ask you as individuals and as members of this faith community: *Do you promise*, by the grace of God, to be Christ’s disciple, to resist oppression and evil, to show love and justice, and to witness to the work and word of Jesus Christ as best you are able? If so, please respond: *I promise, with the help of God*.

Through the grace of God, may hate and fear be transformed into compassion, peace and joy, one individual and one community at a time. Amen.

NOTES

- (1) Heath, Elaine. p. 170. *Feasting on the Word*. See Resources.
- (2) Lose, David. p. 169. *Feasting on the Word*. See Resources.
- (3) Oliver, Mary. *New and Selected Poems*. Beacon Press (Boston, 1992), 114.
This poem may also be found online.

RESOURCES

Bartlett, David and Barbara Brown Taylor, Editors. *Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume 3*. Westminster John Knox Press (Louisville KY, 2010), 166-171 (Authors: Elaine Heath, Richard Shaffer, James Thompson, and David Lose).

Merrill, Timothy, ed. *www.homileticsonline.com*. Sermons and commentary on Luke 8: 26-39.