

Galatians 3:23-29 ~ Luke 8:26-39

*No Longer*

Second Sunday after Pentecost ~ June 23, 2019

The Rev. Dr. Laurie Brubaker Davis

*Introduction to Gospel Lesson*

What is there to like about this story? It's long and loud. It's weird and confusing. Jesus talks to demons, a herd of pigs meet a dramatic demise, and Jesus gets run out of town. We're not sure why. For healing the town lunatic? For causing the swineherds economic ruin? Exorcisms, even by Jesus, are unsettling.

One thing is sure: there is nothing ordinary about this gospel story that launches us into our longest season that what we call "Ordinary time" in the church year. Green because it is our season to grow in our discipleship—all the way from this Sunday until Advent. Just imagine how much we might grow. Beginning now as we pull up to the shore and see something very strange.

Is that a naked man there on the sand, shouting? Let us watch and listen and see where this story takes us with this Word from the one whose thoughts are not our thoughts, whose ways are not our ways from the Gospel According to Luke 8, beginning at verse 26.

*Sermon*

Jesus will talk to anyone. And he will listen to them. Even if it is a man possessed by demons--a whole Legion (which is literally 6,000 Roman soldiers) of them. Jesus engages immediately in a dialogue with this ravaged Gentile man who recognize Jesus and shouts: "What have you to do with me, Jesus?" We learn quickly: He has *everything* to do with them. Yes, Jesus even talks to demons.

Jesus begins by asking the man his name. Then they beg him not once, but twice, to be merciful to them. Jesus listens to them and does what they ask. He exorcises the demons from the man and sends them into the herd of pigs on the hillside. The pigs go berserk and all get drowned, sending the demons exactly where they didn't want to go. So, if you like irony, there's one thing to like about this story right off the bat.

Of course, the swineherds didn't like it at all. Their entire inventory of stock gone. Economic ruin in one afternoon. They went running off shouting about this bizarre misfortune far and wide. OK, so I'm sure all you farmers and animal rights activists don't like this story so far. But the man, formerly known as Legion, is freed. Jesus exorcised the demons and healed him. The man who was naked, the man who was the tormented town crazy, is no longer naked and no longer crazy. You might even say he was "clothed in Christ."

It's a miracle! And everyone else is thrilled, right? A man so far gone so clearly lost, clearly beyond hope, is now healed and whole. A new man. Yay! A happy ending, yes? Not

hardly. As Luke tells us, the people of the town who saw what Jesus did were scared out of their wits. They were so freaked out they asked Jesus to go away. And Jesus listened to them, too. When they asked him to leave town, “he got in his boat, and returned.”

The only request Jesus didn’t grant was the one of the now healed and clothed man. He begged to go with Jesus and become one of his band of traveling disciples. But Jesus told him to stay in his own Gentile homeland and share the news of what God had done. And so, he stayed put and turned into a preacher. The moral of the story? *Anyone* can become a preacher...Maybe that’s what I like about this story.

Seriously, here’s what I like about it: I get to talk about demons. Right here in a Presbyterian church on a Sunday morning. Not a go-to topic for us, being decent, orderly and upbeat Presbyterians. But here we have Jesus talking to and overpowering a Legion of them. What’s a responsible preacher to do? We must look this story, demons and all, in the eye and call it by name. The challenge of this demon-filed story is which one of the 6,000 to chase down. There is the military occupation demon, given the historical context and geographical placement of this story, along with the clearly military term, Legion. There is also the economic angle and upset of the status quo, caused by the death of the pigs. Or we could chase down the story’s call to take a hard look at how people suffering from mental illnesses are regarded and treated. Just to name a few.

The demon I feel called to address is none of these. However, in some ways the demon I will name, encompasses *all* of them. That is the *demon of division*. Paul speaks to it in our Galatians passage when he writes about doing away with, the “no longer” of, the divisions that were dividing that early Christian community: Jew/Gentile (race); slave/free (class status); male/female (gender bias). Paul saw the unity of Christ underneath and beyond these divisions, giving everyone a new identity, a fundamental identity that bridges all these divides. Another way of saying this, is the power of Christ to exorcise the *demon of division*. Upsetting, disorienting, world-changing.

Yet here we are today, possessed by divisions that infect and derail our political and social institutions—here and everywhere. These divisions scare us. They keep us from talking, even to people we know and love about issues where our politics land us on opposite sides. We’d rather leave that demon, as unruly and scary as it is, bound up and on the edge of our consciences banished to the tombs beyond our every day dealings. The Gospel Good News here is Jesus has everything to do with this demon that silences us and tries to keep us from accessing the ultimate power of Divine Love. Yes, Jesus is the one power who can exorcise the demon of division. It is because of Jesus, who will talk to anyone, that we can no longer fear the demon of division and its power over us. I hear Jesus asking us, “How much longer?”

Because Jesus will talk to anyone, we are being called to do the same. Do you want to exorcise the demon of division? We need to trust Jesus to help us talk and listen to one another about those difficult issues that divide us and typically silence us. Apart from Jesus, and this story, we make think it is better to be silent than to wake some of those sleeping giants. One of

those issues, that seems to be waking up in our public discourse again, is abortion. A discussion that began at a recent Presbytery meeting, then with our session, and our Christian Education Committee has spurred us toward the idea of offering an Adult Forum series. It would be an opportunity to talk and listen, to study what scripture, our confessions, and faith leads us to say and do on this complicated, inflected topic. This single issue, abortion, contains multiple threads concerning personal, political, and economic morality.

For today, Our Gospel story today encourages us to fear not: Jesus has and will overcome the demon of division and can transform that energy into productive, healing conversation and action. No longer can we remain silent and let these divisions bleed the Body of Christ (the church), and the body politic of our dear country. Jesus bled and died for us, so that we could love as Christ loves us. And so that we could let the ultimate power of Divine Love exorcise the demons that threaten to devour it. God raised Jesus from the dead so that we, like the man no longer named Legion, can share the news of Jesus LOVE, that casts out all demons.

The Gerasenes were scared by Jesus power to upset the status quo. Are we? The women who found the tomb empty on Easter morning were frightened, too. Maybe that's where transformation begins: by facing our fears of what God's LOVE, let loose could really do. At the dawn of the end of apartheid, the comprehensive political system of separation by race practiced in South Africa, President Elect Nelson Mandela preached this poem by Marianne Williamson, titled "Our deepest fear." The demon of division had debilitated everyone on all sides. Mandela raised up this poem, I think because It speaks Jesus' language of love that can overcome the demon of division, personal and political. I invite you to close your eyes as I read it, and let its truth seep into the crevices and tombs in your heart this morning:

*Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate.  
Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure.  
It is our light, not our darkness  
That most frightens us.*

*We ask ourselves  
Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous?  
Actually, who are you not to be?  
You are a child of God.*

*Your playing small  
Does not serve the world.  
There's nothing enlightened about shrinking  
So that other people won't feel insecure around you.*

*We are all meant to shine,  
As children do.  
We were born to make manifest  
The glory of God that is within us.*

*It's not just in some of us;  
It's in everyone.*

*And as we let our own light shine,  
We unconsciously give other people permission to do the same.  
As we're liberated from our own fear,  
Our presence automatically liberates others.*

Because of Jesus, who will talk to anyone, so must we. That's how we let our light shine. That's how we let other people's light shine, too. Because of Jesus, we are no longer content to remain the same. Because of Jesus, we can no longer let our divided world stay as it is. Thanks be to God.