

Luke 8:26-39

Fourth Sunday after Pentecost (C)

20 June 2010

“Do We Still Believe in Demons?”

I. Our reading from the Gospel of St. Luke this morning was the account of the demon-possessed man living in Gentile territory on the eastern shore of the Sea of Galilee. It records one of several encounters recorded in Luke’s Gospel which our Lord had with demons, literally “unclean spirits” (Luke 4:31-35; 8:2; 9:37-43; 11:14). In each case, as again in today’s reading, Jesus casts out the demons and sets free those who have been oppressed by them. In the next chapter of this Gospel, which isn’t one of the appointed readings from Luke in this series, were told that the Lord sent out His Twelve Apostles and “*gave them power and authority over all demons and to cure diseases*” (9:1). Certainly, in the worldview of the Bible, demons, “unclean spirits”, fallen angelic heavenly beings are real and active.

Today, of course, there are many, even among theologians, who say that demons are simply pre-scientific explanations for disease and disorder. They acknowledge the reality of evil, but can’t accept that demons are real invisible creatures who might have something to do with evil. For some, the idea of evil spirits lets people shirk personal responsibility for their bad behaviours, which is a real concern since so many people from Eve in the Garden on have excused themselves by saying, “The Devil made me do it!”

On the other hand there are those, especially among certain TV evangelists, who see a demon “under every bush”, directly involved in every disease and disturbance and evil thought. They make big money by claiming the power to cast demons out. Sadly, some are especially good at preying on the fearful and superstitious.

But, really, either extreme plays into the devil’s hand. C.S. Lewis, author of the *Chronicles of Narnia*, puts it well in the preface to his earlier *Screwtape Letters*: “There are two equal and opposite errors into which our race can fall about the devils. One is to disbelieve in their existence. The other is to believe, and to feel an excessive and

unhealthy interest in them. [The demons] themselves are equally pleased by both errors and hail a materialist or a magician with the same delight” (published 1941). I have a hunch they are also delighted when people either ascribe to them too much power, or see them as requiring very little attention at all.

II. It’s obvious in the Gospel account that the demons do have power. They rob this man of his sanity. They drive him to shun the fellowship of fellow human beings to live naked among the tombs. When people try to restrain him, possibly for his own good, he breaks out of his bonds with what would seem supernatural strength. But, make no mistake, demonic power is always ultimately destructive. Destructive of health. Destructive of relationships.

And, of all the relationships the devil wants to disrupt and destroy most of all, is a relationship with Jesus. Look what the demons get the man to say when Jesus approaches: “I beg you not to torment me!” They convince the man that Jesus and His disciples are the ones to avoid; Jesus is the one who will cause discomfort and distress.

And that’s what the devil and his allies in the unbelieving world want us to believe—that Jesus, the Christian faith and the Church are at the root of most of the world’s problems; that without them we’d be a lot happier and healthier. What the demons want us to believe is that we just try to be good people who try to do good as best we can.

Sound crazy? Well, to many, it makes perfect sense. It’s what the “*elementary principles of the world*”, or the “elemental spirits of the world” as the alternate translation noted in our Bibles, which St. Paul referred to in the Second Lesson, have always tried to teach (Galatians 4:3). It’s at the centre of the whole letter to the Galatians: urging us not to submit again to the demonic oppression that we are “good” because of our own attempts at being good. As one pastor wrote to his flock:

“Satan doesn’t care if you try to keep the ten commandments, provided that *you* take the credit for keeping them. In fact, he will assist your moral resolve if you will do it that way. Satan doesn’t

mind if you come to church, or teach Sunday School, . . . or seek prayer in the schools—he’s all in favor of whatever your moral agenda is, provided you rely on yourself instead of the Spirit of Christ and take credit for it yourself instead of humbly giving all glory to God” (John Piper).

When that doesn’t work, or even when it does, the demons accuse our conscience: “How do you know that you’ve done good enough?” . . . “Why even bother trying?” These kinds of satanic attacks are often even more devastating than more spectacular outright attacks on body and mind. As C.S. Lewis has the senior demon, Screwtape, write to his junior trainee, Wormwood: “Indeed the safest road to Hell is the gradual one—the gentle slope, soft underfoot, without sudden turnings, without milestones, without signposts” (Letter XII).

Do we still believe in demons? Yes, we do. Should we be concerned about them? Yes, again. Jesus says: “*The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy*” (John 10:10). In Ephesians 6, St. Paul writes: “*Put on the whole armour of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil. For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against . . . the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms*” (6:11-12). In concert with the deceptive philosophies of an unbelieving world and our own sinful nature, we have an unholy trinity arrayed against us.

But should we be afraid of them as Christians? Absolutely not. While Satan and his evil foes have power, they do not have even a fraction of the power of our triune God. For all the awful things the demons did to the Gerasene man and to the poor herd of pigs; and for as numerous as they were, the demons were afraid of Jesus. They knew exactly who they were dealing with: “*the Son of the Most High God*” (v. 28).

James 2 tells us: “*You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder*” (2:19). They clearly know what St. John would write, that “*the reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil*” (1 John 3:8). They came to know, even though they thought they had destroyed Jesus on the cross, that “*since the children share in flesh and blood, He Himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death He might*

destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery” (Hebrews 2:14-15).

And because the demons shudder at the name of our Saviour, they shudder when we rely on Him as baptized children of God. They shudder because when we are baptized in the name of the Triune God we “*put on Christ*”, we are “*clothed*” with Christ (Galatians 3:37, ESV, NIV). He, in the power of the Holy Spirit, takes up residence in our bodies.

That’s why we can join with Martin Luther, when we feel attacked by the devil to doubt and despair, in crying out, “I am baptized, I am baptized in Christ” (see *Lutheran Service Book*, hymn 594) “Get behind me, Satan! My Jesus is with me! His blood has covered all my sins. You have no power over me. I belong to Him. I renounce you, and all your works, and all your ways” (see *LSB*, 270).

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Probably one of the saddest parts of today’s Gospel reading is when the Gerasenes beg Jesus to go away. They had seen the result of what He had done for their demon-possessed neighbour. They witnessed that he was now clothed, in his right mind, and sitting at Jesus feet. But all they could see was the poor drowned pigs that the demons had drowned. They could see only what they had lost, instead of rejoicing that what was lost was now found. Once again, Satan twisted things around, so that people were bound by their fears rather than freed and comforted by God’s deliverance.

But the former demoniac? He wanted to stay close to Jesus. He begged Jesus “that he might be with him” (v. 38). But instead, the Lord tells him “Return to your home, and declare how much God has done for you” (v. 39).

And so we do the same this morning, as we soon take leave of this place. By example and word we proclaim how much God has done for us in Jesus. We freely share the Good News with those who are still deceived and oppressed by Satan’s lies. For “Jesus has come and brings pleasure eternal” (*LSB*, 533:1). And He is with us forever, even until the end of the age.

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