

## The Episcopal Church in the Pemi-Baker Valley

Proper 7C June 19, 2016

Today, our readings confront us with two powerful stories, the first an the account of Elijah fleeing from the wrath of evil Queen Jezebel and then Jesus' casting out the evil spirits and healing of the Gerasene demoniac. This healing is one of the longest and most complicated stories in the gospels. Luke tells us that Jesus and his disciples have just endured a storm at night on the Sea of Galilee, and in the morning they come ashore on the east side of the lake, the country of the Gerasenes which is opposite of Galilee. The exact location is a bit unclear, but it is populated by Gentiles, the outsiders, people who are not the people of God.

Jesus has barely set foot on dry ground, when he is met by a strange character, a man "*who had many demons.*" Clearly deranged, the man is naked and comes to Jesus from living in a graveyard, not your everyday person one expects to meet on the streets of Plymouth or Ashland. No, this man, in his demon-possession, in his extreme mental illness, is clearly cut off from normal society.

We might want to spend a little time here on the subject of demon possession. Simply put, it was the first century understanding that illness, whether physical or mental, was the result of evil spirits, or demons, getting in and taking over a person. And the only cure for possession by these invisible, but living creatures was to cast them out. That may sound a bit simplistic, but all of us are aware that many diseases today, virus and such, are the result of almost invisible, macrobiotic germs living inside of us, and that it is possible for those invisible things to go out from us and into other people, infecting them, just like the demons.

This man, we are told, has been possessed by evil spirits for a long time, and as a result, he is cut off, separated from normal human relations. The possession, his mental illness, is so great that civil society has attempted to restrain him, binding him with chains and shackles. And the power of these evil spirits has offered him a kind of false liberation, freeing his from his restraints. But it is a fraudulent kind of liberation that only drives him further into isolation away from society.

Luke relates that one of the demons recognizes Jesus and shouts out "*What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God?*" [Interestingly, the disciples have not yet recognized who Jesus is, but here the demons do.] Of course, it may be that the man is also asking, "*What have you to do with me?*" Because Jesus always has something to do with those who are gripped by the reality of evil.

Jesus ignores the demons' comment and immediately asks, "*What is your name?*" And the evil spirits reply, "*Legion,*" to which Luke adds, because "*many demons had entered him.*" Consider for a moment the word '*legion.*' the Roman army's designation for a military unit of some five or six thousand men, the equivalent to our army's division. That's a lot of demons.

The fact that the demons tell their name indicates Jesus power over them, and they beg not to be sent to the '*abyss,*' the netherworld, but into a herd of pigs. Nevertheless, their freedom was short-lived, and ironically the herd immediately charges off a cliff, and all drown in the sea.

Now cured, now liberated from his demon possession, the man is next seen clothed and seated at Jesus' feet, a position that symbolized one who learns from a rabbi, in other words, a disciple. And the story concludes with the reaction of the other Gerasene people. Both those who witnessed the healing and others who only heard about it demand that Jesus leave. Why? Were they afraid? Perhaps. Were they concerned about economic loss? Probably. In any case, they recognize that Jesus is not safe to have around, and they ask him to leave their territory.

As Jesus and his disciples prepare to enter the boat, the cured man asked to be allowed to go with them. And here, I think, we should take notice. Jesus refuses, and he instructs the man to go home, to go back to his own, to tell people what God has done for him.

We don't talk much about demons or evil spirits today, but this week we are still coming to grips with the evil done by a clearly demented man in Orlando, Florida. And people want to know, "what possessed him?" Was the slaughter of 49 individuals in a nightclub an act of terror, or was it a hate crime? Was he a radical Islamist, or was the target the gay community? And as the evening was for Latino gays, does this indicate a fear of Hispanics, of immigrants. Or, perhaps, do all these categories apply? I doubt that we'll ever know, but he was surely a man full of demons.

The killer was an American-born Muslim, but one religion did not attack LGBT people in Orlando, a demented man did. Still, the result is fear, fear among gays and lesbians, fear by many who now feel uneasy at being among large crowds in very public places.

The lengthy story of Elijah and his flight from the evil Queen Jezebel is also a story of fear.

Most of you, I imagine, have heard of Jezebel and her husband, the dreadful King Ahab. Literature has perpetuated the characterization of these two as demonic folk. Ahab was not a particularly good King of Israel, but his wife, Jezebel, was surely worse. She was a foreign born woman who worshipped foreign gods, and she brought the worship of those gods to Israel. Her idolatry was opposed by the prophet Elijah, who arranged for a contest to determine which God was real, which God has true power. On Mount Carmel, a great contest was won by Yahweh, the God of Israel, and in a fit of religious zeal at the victory, Elijah is said to have personally killed 500 prophets of the false gods. [From another perspective, you might call this a hate crime.]

But this was a personal defeat for King Ahab, and he relates this to his wife Jezebel. Jezebel, it appears, acts like an even stronger evil vice-president, taking the situation into her own hands. Acting on her own authority, and without even asking the king, she sends messengers to Elijah informing him that he has but one more day to live, and she obviously has the military power to make that happen. So in fear, facing a death sentence, Elijah flees.

That's where today's first lesson begins, as Elijah makes the arduous trek from the central highlands of Israel to Mount Horeb, or Sinai, in the southern end of the Sinai Peninsula. Near the summit of the mountain where Moses received the Ten Commandments, there is a plateau named for Elijah and his experience of fleeing to God. I've been there; it's actually a lovely spot with a magnificent view of a wilderness - safely away for all worldly powers. But Elijah is not allowed to stay for long. The word of the LORD came to him, saying, "*What are you doing here, Elijah?*" He answered, "*I have been very zealous for the LORD, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away.*" Clearly, Elijah is alone and afraid.

Then the word of the Lord comes to him again, saying, "*Go out and stand on the mountain before the LORD, for the LORD is about to pass by.*" Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire."

In all of this, Elijah does not do what is asked. He remains hidden in the cave. But after the wind, earthquake and fire, there came a sound of sheer silence. When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. Then there came a voice to him that again said,

*"What are you doing here, Elijah?"* Elijah repeats his tale of fear and his obvious desire to stay in the shelter of this sacred mountain. But the Lord will have none of it. And Elijah is sent back. Back to Israel, back to political turmoil, back to his dangerous homeland to continue his work as a prophet.

Joan Chittister writes of her mother telling her as a child, "Joan, you can't ever really run away from anything. In the end, you only take yourself with you." And I know that often what troubles me most is not something outside of me, but, like those invisible demons, it is inside me, waking me in anxiety in the middle of the night, making me fearful over things about which nothing can be done. And the last thing I want in those frightful moments is more silence. But Elijah heard the Lord in the sound of silence. For Elijah, the sheer silence held God's voice, God's presence. In silence, Elijah heard. And we, too, should be unafraid to seek God in silence.

Silence is a rare commodity in our contemporary world, and we risk becoming addicted to noise, as we are constantly bombarded by the twenty-four-hour cycle of television and talk radio where conversation feels almost like a competitive sport. But most of us, I think, would benefit from silence, from speaking less and listening more, listening to God calling us out of our fears and back into the reality of life with all its dangers.

I think that there is the connection between these two readings for the day. The safety of exile is not for either Elijah or the healed demoniac. No, both are sent home. Both are sent back into a fearful and dangerous world, in the words of one of our post communion prayer, *"forgiven, healed, renewed."* And perhaps that's the message for us.

Jesus told the healed man, *"Return to your home, and declare how much God has done for you."* And at Mt. Sinai, Elijah heard much the same. Return to your homeland, and declare what God has done and will do in the lives of God's people. Elijah is the foremost example of the Hebrew prophet. But here, just as in last week's account of King David's treachery, one of Israel's heroes is shown in all his weakness. But weakness, even treachery, doesn't prevent God from coming to people caught in the grips of evil. And, likewise, in the account of the healing of the deranged man, Jesus reverses the social order and raised the tormented 'outsider' to the level of disciple, calling him also to go home to his own to tell the good news of what God had done for him. Now healed, now restored to his authentic self, he can live his life for God.

And that can be our story too. Restored to our true selves and called to live out our individual ministries in our communities, we, too, can show in the way we live what God has done for us. How is this possible in our fearful world? Because we know ourselves a people, forgiven, healed and renewed. And like those from today's scriptures, we, too, hear ourselves called to go to our own, and by word and deed, to let the good news of God's healing and restoring love for us be known by one and all.

*Amen.*