

Second Sunday after Pentecost, Year C
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Sermon June 23, 2019
St. Mark's Episcopal Church, Milwaukee, WI

Demon Possession: Not Just for Snake Handlers

Greetings, St. Mark's! It's so wonderful to be back here in Milwaukee, and so nice of you all to subject yourselves to another sermon from me as I train to be a priest! I had to laugh when I first saw today's readings. I imagined whatever committee that originally set this lectionary getting together, and one person says, "okay, we've got swine and tombs in Isaiah 65," and another replies, "plus, let's see, *more* swine and tombs in Luke 8..." and the third one goes, "heck, whether or not to eat swine and what to do with dead people were probably some of the issues prompting Paul to write Galatians, so bingo! And here's Psalm 22 for good measure."

But seriously, demon possession?! What first came to mind was Robert Duvall handling snakes, or all the head spinning scenes from the *Exorcist*. I wracked my brain, looked through commentaries, and badgered the long-suffering rector of the parish I also attend in Marion, Indiana. Thanks, Father Jim! And I found out possession does not look like how it's popularized in the movies. Nor does it mean mental illness or epilepsy, two things some modern preachers argue. I do not believe such illness is demonic. Particularly when we consider what some would call "the worldview" of the original authors and hearers of this Gospel, we learn what these swine and tombs are really about.

1. In general, the world of the Bible was what some today call "enchanted." Without such things as antibiotics, space shuttles, or the laws of thermodynamics, what we today tend to pull apart into physical OR spiritual all belonged to one big somewhat chaotic landscape. The political and the religious were the same thing; your nation-state had its own gods that fought with other nations' gods; shifting constellations, bad weather, or the flu were all crackling with hidden meanings that needed to be discerned in order to survive another day. It's difficult to imagine, so we today often run the risk of either sentimentalizing this past or pooh-poohing it as backwards.

2. But beyond the Modern West, many folks still encounter the world this way. For instance, in 2013-4, Namibian readers had a lot to say to a doctoral researcher combining ethnography with biblical interpretation of this passage from Luke. For them, it is just common sense that our landscapes themselves, our workplaces, homes, bars and parks are teeming with various spirits—the living, the dead, the good, and the bad, unleashed into the world by our actions. If these spirits are dishonored, they'll make sure people personally experience their own torment. Every inch of the world is populated, and none of these entities can be ignored.¹ And this awareness offers wisdom and insight, as the West continues to struggle with the ways in which modern physics, medicine, and bombs cannot explain or fix everything. I thought about this on Friday morning when I read a report on the after effects of the Chicago police officer who

¹ See Helen C. John, "Legion in a 'Living Landscape': Contextual Bible Study as a Disruptive Tool (Luke 8:26-39 Interpreted in Owamboland, Namibia," *The Expository Times* 128/7 (2017): 313-24.

got a group of his subordinates to torture African-American men into confessions of crime. One of these men, Ronald Kitchen, recently met with high school students encountering this bit of local history in their curriculum and described how after two decades wrongfully placed on death row he is “still on penitentiary time”—he eats too fast, in case the food is taken away; he still hears the rattle of bars; he can’t sleep; and the sight of a Chicago police car sends him into full-blown panic attacks.² We might say that Kitchen has been subjected to the spirits of racism and penal incarceration by those who invited those spirits into their own lives and then inflicted them upon him.

3. With this in mind, consider our Gospel passage as a story about who really understands the spirits of the land. For Luke and the first readers of this text, the reference to “Legions” of demons would have recalled the Roman sack of Jerusalem in 70 AD. In response to the riots of 66, when the Judean rebel factions briefly wrestled back control of Jerusalem, four Roman legions were summoned to surround the city beginning during Passover (our Holy Week). That would be at least 5,000 soldiers, plus their followers, servants, and slaves *per legion*, for a total of at least 20,000 troops descending on the city. The Judeans didn’t stand a chance. Flavia Josephus’ account written soon after the events mentions the four-month long siege causing 1.1 million casualties. When the Romans finally broke through with battering rams, torches, ladders, and swords, Josephus describes “peaceful citizens, weak and unarmed, butchered wherever they were caught,” including within the temple altar area so that “down the sanctuary steps poured a river of blood and the bodies of those killed at the top slithered to the bottom.” He goes on to note that this continued until “the army had no more people to slay or to plunder, because there remained none to be the objects of their fury.”³ The army, you could say, was possessed by spirits of death unleashed by the Roman emperor and his entire political system. And everyone who experienced, survived, or witnessed these events would have been harrowed and tormented by what they saw, heard, smelled, and touched.

4. Gerasene is a town north of Jerusalem, a place at the time of the Gospel composition that was populated by a mix of Gentiles and Jews but with a dominant Greek culture. The residents would have known exactly what horrors happened to the south of them, but because it was several days’ travel away, it might have been temptingly easy to ignore. Put your head down and focus on what’s right in front of you. But there is a man in their midst, “possessed,” who has seen the truth of what the Romans have done. And he’s talking about, enacting, reminding others of it. He’s having taken out on his own body the spirits of the living death that the Romans have been inflicting on the Jews, the desecration of the Temple, the torture and exploitation that’s too uncomfortable for most to face. He’s living in the tombs to remind everyone that this is what’s really going on: death is among them.⁴

² Peter C. Baker, “This, Too, Was History,” *The Point* 18 (Winter 2019), <https://thepointmag.com/2019/politics/this-too-was-history-battle-police-torture-reparations-chicago-schools>, accessed June 22, 2019.

³ Peter Schäfer, *The History of the Jews in Antiquity* (London: Routledge, 1995/2013), 191-2, cited by Wikipedia: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Siege_of_Jerusalem_\(70_CE\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Siege_of_Jerusalem_(70_CE)), accessed June 20, 2019; Flavius Josephus, *The Judean War*, Book 7, Whiston Chapter 1, Section 1, <https://pace.webhosting.rug.nl/york/york/showText?book=7&chapter=1&textChunk=whistonSection&chunkId=1&up.x=&up.y=&text=wars&version=&direction=&tab=&layout=english>, accessed June 20, 2019.

⁴ John, “Legion in ‘Living Landscape,’” 320.

5. And here's the kicker: his community *has allowed this*. They're members of a political order trying to sell itself as the *Pax Romana*, "the Peace" the Roman empire creates by slaughtering those who want relief from religious discrimination and economic oppression. We know this because the Gospel text says the Gerasenes keep pigs—they would have known exactly what pigs meant to the Romans and to the Jews both in terms of religious dietary restrictions, and in terms of the historical research suggesting that one of the legions sent to sack Jerusalem had the wild boar as its mascot. But rather than pay attention to what the Roman army has done, they're raising their food for them and championing the spirits of their army. We can't overlook that this work probably paid, and it may have kept this community safe from state-sanctioned violence. It would have been so hard for the Gentiles of that area to confront their own cultural norms, and for the Jews in town to risk bucking the system. Maybe it's not the pig-keeping in and of itself that's the problem. It's that they're doing this while neglecting the sufferings that have befallen the Jewish community just to the south of them. Rather than listen, heed, and tend to one who personifies that suffering in their midst, they've *chained* him, shunned him, let him wander about naked and hungry. They're enacting the same double standards that our Isaiah passage describes, where the Israelites violate God's laws by eating swine and drinking "abominable broth" while hypocritically telling others, "Keep to yourself, do not come near me, for *I* am too holy for *you*." This is no peace at all.

6. But when Jesus appears on the scene, the demonic powers personified by the Roman army immediately know they're outmatched. By begging to go into the pigs, the food and mascot of the imperial Gentiles, the demons are revealing that rather than what we in the West tend to see as inanimate, voiceless, and insignificant, even animals know the truth—that the land is captivated by the spirit of death brought by the Roman empire. And when the pigs drive themselves off the cliff, they manifest God setting to right the spirit of the land. They show who is truly God—an itinerant colonized Jewish preacher—and who is not—the ones who appear to have it all together, Titus Caesar and his troops. This is massively disruptive to the status quo, just as talking about police torture has proven to be for Chicago—most would prefer not to question the narrative that people in certain uniforms are always right and should always be obeyed. So no wonder Luke records the Gerasenes being frightened out of their minds enough to drive Jesus to go away. They'll have none of this, thank you very much.

7. In fact, these same struggles of Isaiah and Luke recur in the early church, as Paul writes the community in Galatia to release their tendencies to gatekeep based on ethnicity, gender, and class. But as our Psalm reminds us, all of that is the way of empire. By contrast, as our Psalm reminds us, the true God "does not despise nor abhor the poor in their poverty; neither does the Divine hide God's face from them; but when they cry to God God hears them... The poor shall eat and be satisfied... *All* the ends of the earth shall remember and turn to God, and *all* the families of the nations shall bow before the Redeemer who rules over the nations." Jesus embodies that good news with his friends, with his religious leaders, in front of political figures like Herod and Pontius Pilate, for a possessed man in Gerasene, and for you and me.

8. So how do we understand demon possession today? I think these texts are prompting us to consider that our jobs, neighborhoods, banks, and governments create spirits that possess the land, where some people win and others pay the price. What spirits are being unleashed today and by whom? Who is paying the price of these spirits' damage? Just to the

south of *us*, for instance, asylum seekers are being crammed into concentration camp like conditions. Children are being ripped from their family, with no effort to eventually reunite them. Our government is threatening to round up people for deportation back to places they have fled for fear of violence. Spirits of death.

9. It's difficult to know how best to respond. It's scary to buck the system, especially when our own jobs and healthcare are on the line or it's our own loved ones and employers harming those they consider problematically "different" just like the Romans crushed the Judean revolt. But I think our texts today are asking us to recognize those realities and participate in their healing. I'm not suggesting Fr. Burch start handling snakes, although I'm sure he could carry it off if he had to. Rather, Jesus asks the demon possessed man to stay and spread the word in his town. A Gentile man who became a conduit for the spirits of the living death promoted by his own government now remains among his people to tell them of how he's been saved by one their entire culture despises. In Chicago, police officers submitted anonymous tip-offs to the journalists who kept tracking down the stories, the lawyers who would not stop fighting, and the activists who would not keep quiet. It's maybe especially scary for Episcopalians to think of how to talk about God freeing us from sin, let alone demons! But I think that's who we are in this story—the demon-possessed man in Garasene, the Jews and Greeks, men and women, slaves and free, brought into Jesus Christ's family and called to tell of it, act it out, in our own landscapes. May we be freed of the spirits of death and bear the spirit of God's gift of life as we proclaim, 'O God, may *your* heart live forever!' Amen.