

Second Sunday after Pentecost, Year C
The Rev. George Arceneaux
St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee, Wisconsin
June 19, 2022
Luke 8:26-39 | Mark 5:1-20

The power of this story, our gospel from Luke on the Gerasene the demoniac, the story of Jesus facing the Legion demon in the man possessed is intriguing, complete in its structure as a tale, and is rich in meaning across the board. As a kid, this felt like a scary story to hear at night as we hear Jesus speak with a demon who names themselves and the demon pleads with Jesus not to cast them into the abyss.

The fear and interest I felt upon first hearing, it was also put into perspective by a professor, Margaret Mitchell at the University of Chicago, who noted to her students once that this was written in part to be a horror story accessible to the masses, meant to be as broadly intriguing and compelling. She noted that the details at the beginning of the story situate the terror of the Gerasene demoniac's and the strength of this demon to in turn convey Jesus' power.

The details note that the man possessed lives on the outskirts of the city he once inhabited, that he was accompanied by people but now his companions are the tombs and the dead as he howls in madness. And these details emphasize that above all, this possessed man is alone. Accompanied by no one but the demon's voices, no one coming to his aid but of course the hero of our story:

Jesus of Nazareth.

Now while I have spoken of this story as a horror story, it is unlike others because it is scripture, and it is meant to convey something about our lives and God's impact on our lives.

As I've thought of this man from Gerasene, of his isolation and Jesus' mission to dispatch Legion and meet the man amongst the tombs when no one else will, I continue to find myself thinking of a mother I met some years ago. She was preparing to deliver her child. A daughter. The mother was kind and sweet as could be; quick with a joke and her crass humor which I loved, pieces of her being that showed her as a loving woman. She also lived with an addiction to heroin. And she knew her baby would be born with that addiction too.

She had planned to give her daughter up for adoption, and when we spoke, it was about her life. She spoke about how hard it had been. That her parents had been abusive, verbally and physically. That her baby's father had been similarly cruel to her in her berating of her before he had left her life. She found herself alone in her pregnancy, and the voices that drove her addiction left her increasingly alone and with a history of hurt and loss.

Alone amongst the tombs.

When she gave birth, it wasn't easy. And her daughter was soon whisked away by hospital staff to begin weaning her and navigating the symptoms of withdrawal. The baby's adoptive parents watched over the child in a neonatal ICU room, as her mother rested and recovered and dealt with her own issues associated with her addiction and the days spent in the hospital that prevented her from using.

But there came a day when I happened to meet this mother as she held her newborn; time with the life she had born which she had no guarantee of getting again as her daughter would continue her life with other parents.

The mother held her with quiet intention and ease as the baby swayed in her arms with quiet, open eyes. The apparent symptoms of withdrawal had begun to abate as the mother continued to live with her own addiction.

And the mother spoke of how happy and hopeful she was that her daughter would be loved. And she spoke of loving her daughter; that she felt happy knowing that this girl who was so intimately part of her would live her own life loved by her adoptive parents.

I've wondered what happened to that mother. I've wondered if indeed that daughter is now living in love with her adoptive parents as her birth mother had hoped. She would be about 5 or 6 now by my reckoning.

What I do know is that despite the hurtful voices of the mother's past; the voices of her own parents and the man who had fathered this daughter, in spite of the traumas of and those that led to her addiction, the hope of love prevailed. As I have thought of it in this reading of the Gospel, Jesus' voice stood against the myriad demons' voices amongst the tombs.

What seems most frightening to me about the Gerasene demoniac's story is that the tombs he resided in and the hurtful voices that were in his mind are as real as that mother's family history and addiction. They are as real as the hurts and traumas and addictions and abusive relationships we face today. Yet so too is the voice of Christ that stood against the evil that man from Gerasene faced and it was the voice of Christ, that voice of love that brought hope to that mother for her daughter's life.

We all are subject to voices that may drive us to isolation and hurt. We have seen hurt in others who have similarly lived amongst tombs and been alone. It felt that way when, pulling out of the boundary waters yesterday I got word from Ian that yet another shooting had occurred, this time at an Episcopal Church outside Birmingham, Alabama. That real evil is so painfully real. Yet so too is that voice of Christ, the presence to which Legion cried in horror "do not torment me and send me to the abyss." That still small voice of love persists for us. It will never forget us, it will never abandon us, it will never abuse us or seek to rob us of ourselves. It will always seek us, no matter where we are. Even when we are alone amongst the tombs.