

## **Sermon: Luke 8.26-39**

*Delivered Sunday June 23, 2019, The Second Sunday after Pentecost. Readings: 1 Kings 19.1-15; Psalm 42 & 43; Galatians 3.23-29; Gospel of Luke 8.26-39*

Our gospel story for today is kinda spooky; where after previously calming the winds and waves of a fierce storm out in Lake Galilee, Jesus and his disciples head across to the other side of the lake, to the southeast shores of the lake to an area known as the Decapolis, which was a greek region and the gospels tell us that it was in this region, where Jesus and his disciples encounter a demon-possessed man who was deeply disturbed and unbalanced, to say the least.

When Jesus meets the man, the man was naked and was living in some kind of a cemetery and for some time, as we've been told, the man had been bound with chains and shackles. And when Jesus asks the man what is his name: the man answers back: "My name is Legion; which in those days, was a Roman military term for a group of men totalling in the thousands, somewhere between 5-6 thousand, which suggests that this man had something like 5 or 6 thousand demons lurking within him. And before long, Jesus casts all the demons out of the demon possessed man by sending them into a herd of pigs, and then when people came out to see what had happened, they saw the man now sitting calmly at Jesus' feet, and most importantly, in his right mind.

Now I don't know about you, about what your feelings are about the possibility of demon possession, or the supernatural in general, but in my ministry, I have actually been asked if I have seen anything strange before like this or what I think of demon possession.

And I always like to tell people that when it comes to what we understand about this controversial subject, I like to remind people that back in Jesus' day, people assumed that the world was indeed full of demons, and nature spirits, and angels, who often controlled not only the weather, but also controlled natural processes affecting our minds and often took possession of persons or controlled their fate.

But nowadays, of course, I think it is much more common for us to attribute such natural calamities and disorders of the mind to the forces of nature or to internal mental processes that cause just as disturbing forms of anxiety and depression, and compulsive disorders as well as perhaps most frighteningly, Alzheimer's and dementia related disorders that are every bit as terrifying as meeting a demon.

In fact in a recent poll, both Canadians and Americans have said that we are afraid of developing Alzheimer's disease more than any other life threatening disease, because with medical intervention, you can battle many forms of cancer and beat it, and you can face diabetes and live with daily treatments, or you can change your life and defeat heart disease, and you can also recover from a stroke or a heart attack. But Alzheimer's disease is another story. There is no cure. Alzheimer's is 100% fatal and over 750,000 Canadians are living right now with this disease. There probably isn't a household or a person here in Church, who doesn't know someone who is dealing with this dreadful disorder. And like the man who was suffering from many different demons within him, with dementia, the disease manifests itself equally quite different and in bizarre ways in every person it affects.

In fact, if you've ever wondered what living with dementia might be like and the confusion it causes in our brains, it has been suggested trying to imagine ourselves in

a car with 10 screaming children, all demanding something different, and it's our job to drive them somewhere. That is often what our loved ones with Alzheimer's experience.

I remember when I was working at St. Joseph's Veterans Hospital in London, as an intern chaplain a few years ago, I worked on a dementia ward. And one of the first times, I was on my own, I remember hearing this dreadful sobbing coming from a side way away from the main hallway where the nurse's station was, and where I would walk up and down doing the rounds. And a male nurse looked at me and kinda shrugged his shoulders and said: ah, he's having another weeping moment, why don't you go talk to him.

And I was like, ah okay. And so I walked into the lonely white and bare room that smelled horribly of disinfectant and where there was an elderly man sitting a table in the corner bent over weeping, holding his head in his hands. And as I approached him, he heard me coming and he looked up and through his tear-stained eyes, he cried out: oh, I'm going to hell, I'm going to hell, I don't want to die. I'm so scared, and then he began swearing all sorts of vile things at me suggesting where I could shove the bible I was holding in my hand, just like this was some scene out of the film, The Exorcist.

And it wasn't like I was going to get rid of his dementia, but I ended up sitting down with him, and I told him that I was a 'chaplain,' and at that moment his eyes bulged wide, and horror spread across his face and like the demoniac in our story today who cried out to Jesus not to torment him, the man looking at me started repeating again, that he's going to hell.

I asked him his name, and he didn't know it. For just like again, the man in our gospel story, his name was Legion, his Alzheimers had stolen his identity and had replaced it with any number of anxious and disturbing forces lurking within him, that now owned and controlled his life, because that's what Alzheimers does.

But then I told him, that sir, I don't think that's what God wants for us, and I don't think that's why Jesus came to us...because he wants us to be safe and at peace, and at that moment, I kid you not, at that moment, this guy's eyes opened wide again, but I'll never forget the look of calm that crossed his face, and he told me that he loved Jesus, and I told him that nothing will ever separate us from that love.

And then he asked me, well how do you know that, and then I held up my bible, and I said: cause it tells me so, and I asked him, do you remember that song? And then we began to sing together: Jesus loves me this I know, cause the bible tells me so...And then all of the sudden, the man was, just in that moment, kind of like his old self. Something that I would learn after this encounter, is that we don't know how, but often music has a power within it that can help unlock powerful memories in our minds.

And then I asked the guy, do you remember where you heard that song, and he told me that he used to sing in his baptist choir as a boy, and then out of dumb luck, I started singing What a friend we have in Jesus, and then the man started singing his heart out, while other people who were kinda watching what was going on, just kind of moved away, kinda like the people in our gospel this morning, who after seeing Jesus heal the demoniac, felt kinda scared by whatever power was coming out of him.

You know the Anglo-American poet, T.S. Eliot, once wrote in the Four Quartets, you are the music while the music lasts. And I tell you, as long as I was singing to this

man, this man was his old self. Where he could remember his name, and his wife's name, and where he had gone to Church, and how he had served in the Second World War, which was how he got into the hospital in the first place.

And it was so funny, when the nurse came to get the guy to move him along to whatever appointment he had to go to, the nurse asked him, how are you? And like some grumpy old Fred Sanford from Sanford and Son, the guy just looked at the nurse and said: what do you want, you big dummy, can't you see I'm having a nice talk with this fellow!

And then I started in with Amazing Grace, and then the guy's eyes opened wide again, and he waved goodbye to me as he was led away, and I was left in the room by myself pondering the mystery and the miracle, but also the love, the healing love of Jesus, that I believe, I had witnessed and experienced.

Now I wasn't fooling myself for one moment that this guy was ever going to get better, but I tell you, while the music lasted, this man was the music, and in the music of Jesus, this man's identity, however brief, was restored to him.

Like the man in our gospel who slept in tombs, isolated, in that hospital side room, I encountered a man who was deeply lonely, and deeply unbalanced and disturbed and ravaged by a force beyond his control and at that point, all that mattered, was that I give him some sense of community, some sense of hope that while he will battle every day with these demons of depression, and anger, and fear, within that struggle, is a loving and compassionate God, who out of the depths of the rapids and floods that overwhelm us, the Lord hears our cries, and our loved one's cries, and as in the psalm we said together earlier; he grants his loving-kindness to us in the dark night

while his song is with me and God sends these people still his love, and whether that comes in the form of professional caregivers or amateur intern chaplains like myself, or most importantly, the family and friends of loved ones who are dealing with this horrible affliction, God is with us and so may I pray, that for all of you who know someone who is battling this terrible disease, there are people you can get in touch with, and there are people who deeply care for your loved ones, and can provide us with much comforting knowledge about how we can treat and care for people dealing with this disease. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.