

I Believe; Help My Unbelief

9:14-29

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I want to give you a heads up that there will be some discussion of mental health and suicide in this sermon. I mentioned this on our church facebook page earlier in the week, but I know that not all of you will have seen that. Please take care and take a break from the service for your own well-being, if that's what you need.

When I was a child, I had an intense fear of the supernatural. I was terrified of vampires and werewolves and I would go to sleepovers at friends' houses and many of them liked to watch horror movies. Not wanting to seem like a coward or a party pooper, I would watch these movies and then suffer the consequences later when I got home – often running to my parents' room in the middle of the night to sleep on their floor. At one such sleepover, when I was about 11-years-old, my friend convinced me to watch *The Exorcist*, about a young girl, much like we were in age, who becomes possessed by the devil. That movie has scarred me for life and I DON'T RECOMMEND IT!

I also remember that sometime after this experience, we were at church and someone preached a sermon about Jesus exorcising demons! I thought that I was safe from this stuff at church! And now you're telling me that *the Bible* talks about demons, too!??!

We don't talk very seriously about demons these days. Modernity has championed the rational medical explanations for things like demon possession. Contemporary interpretations of these stories tend to attribute what would have been labelled demon possession in the ancient world to an incomplete scientific understanding of mental illness or neurological disorders. For example, we just heard John Epp tell us about the boy with demonic convulsions. Today, we would probably assume that the source of these convulsions was not a demon but perhaps an epileptic condition.

But we must bear in mind the worldview of Jesus and his audience. It appears that Jesus believes that he is speaking directly to real demons and casting them out. This may seem far-fetched to us now, but it is important to consider when we try to understand the text.

I taught a course on Buddhism at Bishop's University in Quebec a number of years ago and I told my classes all sorts of stories about magical monks who lived for hundreds of years, holy saints who could perform miracles, and malicious spirits who committed heinous acts. After one particularly fantastical tale, one of my students asked me: "did that really happen??" And I said, "yes".

We can hold together multiple meanings of these texts: that Jesus was seen as an exorcist in his day and, that today, Jesus could be seen as a healer of mental illness. We can also look beyond these individual narratives and recognize an underlying political message about toppling corrupt systems and ushering in the Kingdom of God. In the Gospel of Luke, chapter 13:32, a group of Pharisees warn Jesus that Herod wants to kill him, and Jesus replies: "Go tell that fox, 'I will keep driving out demons and healing people today and tomorrow, and on the third day I will reach my goal.'" Jesus seems to connect corrupt powers with demonic forces that must be overcome.

No matter how we interpret these narratives, we can say that Jesus is a liberator in every sense of the word.

In Mark 1, Jesus enters the synagogue in Capernaum where he encounters a man possessed by an unclean spirit. The spirit cries out to Jesus: "What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God." The demon recognizes Jesus for who he is and names him.

In Mark 5, after Jesus calms the storm, he comes ashore and immediately a man rushes towards him and throws himself at his feet. This man is known as the Gerasene demoniac. He lives alone among the tombs, cut off from the rest of human society. People have tried chaining him up to keep him from hurting himself and others, but he's always broken free. When he sees Jesus, he shouts: "What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God?" Jesus asks him his name and he replies, "my name is Legion; for we are many." Then Jesus sends the legion of demons out of the man and into a herd of pigs who rush down a steep bank into the sea.

In both of these accounts, the demons call Jesus by his name – both his human name and his divine name: *Son of God*. This is interesting given that in Mark, the only other times that Jesus is called the Son of God is by God at his baptism and by the Roman centurion at his death. Other than that, it is only the demons that refer to him this way.

This mutual naming of Jesus and the demons is interesting. It can be scary to name our demons. When we name our demons, we acknowledge their reality and our need for healing. When the demons name Jesus, they are afraid of him. They know that they will not be allowed to maintain their power.

Maybe having a demon means that something unwanted has taken control of you. I am certain that some of you have felt these forces in your life; the grip of anxiety or the bondage of depression. I lived alongside these particular demons within my household growing up, like unwelcome family members. There were times when I saw the haunting in my dad's eyes and heard about the obsessive thoughts that plagued him. When these demons took over, he would isolate himself from our company, like the Gerasene demoniac, living among the tombs away from his community.

And sometimes the demons would lose their power and my dad would experience long periods of rest. He had a formidable will, tremendous support from family and friends, meaningful work, skilled therapists, effective drugs, and a faith in the presence of God.

My brother Micah, too, still experiences episodes of deep depression. He has given me permission to share with you something he told me that has stuck with me. He said that depression is a liar. Depression tells you that you are not worthy and that you can't keep going; that people would be better off without you. This idea of depression as a liar reminds me of the figure of Satan as it is characterized in Islam. In Islam, Satan is known as a whisperer who whispers bad thoughts to the heart, trying to lead human beings away from God and from what is good.

As someone who has walked with loved ones experiencing these things, I can relate to the father in our scripture story today. How helpless he must feel watching his son suffer the way he does. This is the father's demon.

Before Jesus happens upon the scene, the disciples are trying in vain to help the boy and his father. When Jesus approaches, the father begs him for help. And Jesus says, "If you are able! – All things can be done for the one who believes!" This is a tall command!!! Is Jesus saying that if we believe *enough* that we will be saved??

Listen to how the father answers. The father cries out to Jesus, "I believe; help my unbelief!" What a remarkable response! I believe; help my *unbelief*. It seems paradoxical to have both belief *and* unbelief. Maybe the father is saying that he wants to believe, but has his doubts. Maybe the father is afraid to believe because

he does not want to have false hope. Or, maybe what the father is saying is: I need you God, and I believe that. I *believe* that I can't do this alone without your help. If this is the case, we can read it as a confession of vulnerability and an expression of openness to God's healing power. The father therefore does not lack faith, but is experiencing what the theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher calls an "absolute dependence on God". Schleiermacher says that this feeling of absolute dependence is the essence of Christian faith.

The idea of absolute dependence on anything makes me uneasy. I personally suffer from the sin of self-sufficiency. I do not like to ask for help, perhaps out of pride. But when I need help, and don't ask for it, I am cutting myself off from what God might want to do for me. When Jesus casts out demons, part of that liberation process involves a restoration to community. Remember that the Gerasene demoniac lives alone among the tombs away from other people. When Jesus releases his demons, he is presumably able to return to communal living; to dependence on others.

I wonder what happened next for him and for the others that Jesus healed. Were they free of their demons once and for all? Or did their demons ever creep back from time to time? This is certainly the case for many who experience mental illness. Demons like depression can be episodic in nature. Those who are afflicted can experience periods of peace and rest in between these episodes and learn effective coping strategies, but depression is often a lifelong struggle.

Before I conclude, I'd like to tell you a story that a dear friend of mine named Elvira shared with me a few years ago. She's given me permission to share it with you today. Elvira lost both her husband and her daughter to suicide. Shortly after her daughter died, Elvira was visiting a cousin in the hospital. Her cousin's husband, a pastor, was also there, and he asked Elvira if he could pray for her. He then quoted Psalm 103, talking about how God will take away every pain and disease from us. Elvira interrupted him mid-prayer and said in Low German: *Wea daut glevt jeft en dolla*. This translates to: "anyone who believes *that* has to give a dollar."

I'd have to agree with Elvira on this one. God doesn't take away every pain and every disease. At least not while we walk this earth. To assert such a thing is to do a discredit to the reality of suffering. Elvira is a woman of deep compassion and faith, in spite of, or maybe because of, her painful experiences. She believes that God is love and suffers alongside us. This, to me, is the power of the crucified

Christ: a God that loves us enough to suffer alongside us; a God that does not leave us alone in the tombs, but helps us to name our demons and be restored to ourselves and our community.

Let's end with a prayer:

Loving God, we confess our vulnerability to you and our need for your healing presence. Walk with us in our moments of suffering and give us moments of rest and resurrection along the way. In Jesus' name, amen.