

Breaking the Darkness

Galatians 3: 23-29

Luke 8: 26-39

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Galatians 3: 23-29

Now before faith came, we were imprisoned and guarded under the law until faith would be revealed. Therefore the law was our disciplinarian until Christ came, so that we might be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian, for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise.

Luke 8: 26-39

Then they arrived at the country of the Gerasenes, which is opposite Galilee. As he stepped out on land, a man of the city who had demons met him. For a long time he had worn no clothes, and he did not live in a house but in the tombs. When he saw Jesus, he fell down before him and shouted at the top of his voice, "What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I beg you, do not torment me"— for Jesus had commanded the unclean spirit to come out of the man. (For many times it had seized him; he was kept under guard and bound with chains and shackles, but he would break the bonds and be driven by the demon into the wilds.) Jesus then asked him, "What is your name?" He said, "Legion"; for many demons had entered him. They begged him not to order them to go back into the abyss. Now there on the hillside a large herd of swine was feeding; and the demons begged Jesus to let them enter these. So he gave them permission. Then the demons came out of the man and entered the swine, and the herd rushed down the steep bank into the lake and was drowned. When the swineherds saw what had happened, they ran off and told it in the city and in the country. Then people came out to see what had happened, and when they came to Jesus, they found the man from whom the demons had gone sitting at the feet of Jesus, clothed and in his right mind. And they were afraid. Those who had seen it told them how the one who had been possessed by demons had been healed. Then all the people of the surrounding country of the Gerasenes asked Jesus to leave them; for they were seized with great fear. So he got into the boat and returned. The man from whom the demons had gone begged that he might be with him; but Jesus sent him away, saying, "Return to your home, and declare how much God has done for you." So he went away, proclaiming throughout the city how much Jesus had done for him.

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Paul was a young man in a lot of pain on that summer day in 1981. Drugs and alcohol had once helped to numb some of the pain but now things were spiraling further and further out of his control so that what used to numb the pain instead now inflamed his troubles. He was trapped in a financial black hole as he drifted from low paying job to low paying job, unable to work long and steady since an eight hour day required sobriety that he could not maintain even though he promised himself and his family and friends that he would do so. He'd been evicted from his apartment months before and had been couch surfing, but he had more than worn out

his welcome with everyone he knew. His rust bucket Datsun again needed repairs. Now he was also dealing with legal issues from an assault charge that he claimed was self-defense although it was obvious to all that it was Paul's quick temper once again.

On this one particular day it had just accumulated too much. His demons were unbearably overwhelming. It was impossible to find any way, any good way, out.

Paul's parents were away, so he easily broke into their house and stole his father's hunting rifle and then locked himself into what had been his childhood bedroom. His younger sister came home not long after and heard someone moving around behind the closed door. Guessing it must be Paul, she called out his name. His response was a threat to shoot her and himself.

She ran to a neighbor's house and called the police. Soon there was a large police presence, roads blocked with barriers, nearby neighbors evacuated—including my aunt and uncle. There was chaos and confusion, fear and tears. Contact was made with Paul encouraging, cajoling, demanding him to come out without the rifle. He responded with threats against them and himself. Time—seemingly hours—passed in the standoff.

One of the police officers present was my Dad, and he changed the police approach to Paul. My Dad went into the house and up to the bedroom door and gently knocked. "Paul, can I talk to you for a few minutes?" The response was the cocking of the gun.

My Dad gently asked again. The response was a barrage of swears and threats.

My Dad gently asked again. The response was silence.

"Paul, I know you're overwhelmed and now all this attention is even more overwhelming for you. You must be exhausted. Let me help you. Let's talk."

A long silence before a soft-spoken "ok," and the door was unlocked.

Paul's demons began to be calmed, tamed, healed that day with an act of gentleness, care and compassion. He of course had a long way to go, and as was often the case for my Dad, for any police officer, any first responder, what happens beyond the crisis is rarely known, yet there is always hope for a healed and turned around life.

Paul—just like anyone else who lives with the demons of mental health concerns, of drug abuse and alcohol misuse, and all the emotional distress, depression, isolation, loneliness, emptiness and rejection that goes along with it—knew the feeling—the dark, real and visceral and tormenting experience and feeling of living among the tombs—those dark, quiet, lonely shadows—of the community. They live chained and bound by their legion of demons; held captive by those demands on their bodies, their identity, their time, their lives.

When Jesus and his disciples arrived on the Gerasenes shore, they immediately encountered the man with a legion of demons who controlled his mind, body and spirit. He wore no clothes and lived chained, shackled and guarded among the tombs to protect others from his obscene outbursts, his bizarre behaviors. Unlike all those who avoided this troubled man, Jesus approached him with care and concern as he commanded the unclean spirits to come out of the man. Legion demanded to know what Jesus was daring to do to them as he sent them into a bunch of pigs who ran down a steep bank in a frenzy and drowned in the lake.

The man, freed from his demons, healed back into the life God intended for him, was clothed both in a tunic and in his right, healthy mind. This newly freed man, one of the first Gentiles to be healed by Jesus, wanted to travel with Jesus, to share this wondrous and unexpected grace, but Jesus instead asked him to stay, to "Return to your home, and declare how much God has done for you," and he did. By this healing experience the man was reunited with himself, with his community, Jesus broke open the human-made boundaries between Jew and

Greek, and all human-made boundaries that would seek to separate us from one another and from God for in Christ Jesus we are all children of God through faith. The man clothed in his right mind is also now clothed with Christ as faith has indeed come into his life.

From the very moment that Legion confronts Jesus, we see his healing care and compassion for the forces that literally inhabit, own and control the man.

Just as Jesus healed many physical pains and concerns—the woman with the 12 year flow of blood, a man’s withered hand, a leper, a paralytic, fed thousands of hungry people, restored vision and hearing, and raised some people from the sleep of death, his compassionate healing was also for the anxieties, the tensions, the addictions, the mental health demons that haunt us, that stop us from knowing where our own personal Legion ends, and our own identity begins. At one time or another we all have situations of mental anguish, despair, self-doubt, and far too many of us experience serious mental health consequences directly or indirectly. Jesus wants to heal us from our small, daily, anxieties as well as the large, traumatic, exhausting, overpowering demons of our world and our time.

Vicar Judith Jones asks us to consider some very important questions and their potential answers. How many people around the world are haunted by a traumatic past and tortured by memories? How many live unsheltered and inadequately clothed because of social and economic forces that they cannot overcome, no matter how hard they struggle? How many are imprisoned, regarded as barely human, excluded, cast out? How many are enslaved by addictions no longer knowing where the addiction ends, and their own selves begin?

Jesus’ compassionate healing is for all that aims to damage, deny, destroy human living, for individuals and for humanity, for personal challenges as well as the systems and structures that fail rather than liberate.

UCC minister and long-time peace activist William Sloane Coffin wisely said that “to show compassion for an individual without showing concern for the structures of society that make him an object of compassion is to be sentimental rather than loving.”

God created us, Jesus showed us how, and the Holy Spirit inspires us to address, to heal, to reform, both the individual and systemic ways that lovingly and compassionately provide mental health care and support without stigma, without shame, without mere sentimentality, driving the demons out and away.