

“Modern Day Exorcisms”

Luke 8:26-39

June 20, 2010

4th Sunday After Pentecost

In 1973, a movie came out which both shocked and fascinated the nation. *The Exorcist* was the horrifying story about a young girl possessed by demons which changed her appearance and behavior and caused her great suffering and pain. Two Catholic priests attempt an exorcism, that is, to cast the demons out of the girl and release her from their control and harm. Eventually, they are successful, but not without much fear, suffering, and even death.

This movie scared people to death. There were reports of people throwing up and fainting as they watched the movie. Some claimed to be possessed by the devil when they left the movie. In certain surveys, this movie was voted the scariest movie of all times.

Now, if you saw this movie or recall the stir it created, then you have an idea of how the people in our Gospel reading for today felt. We may gloss over this story lightly as we read it without realizing that this was truly a horrifying event. They were not watching a movie about demon possession and exorcism. They were living it.

It is the account of Jesus going outside of Israel to the country of the Gerasenes where he encounters a Gentile who is possessed by demons. Like in *The Exorcist*, these demons were very real and had changed this man's appearance and behavior. He lived without clothing among the tombs which was pretty strange. People apparently were frightened of him. They tried to keep him under guard, and bind him with chains and shackles. But the demons gave him superhuman strength which allowed him to break free and be driven out into the desert which, according to local superstition, was the dwelling place of ghosts and demons.

The demons even controlled the man's speech. When Jesus asked the demon, “What is your name?”, the demons spoke through the man and replied, “Legion” This is an interesting name. A “legion” was a Roman military unit containing 4,000 – 6,000 soldiers which was legendary for their

ferocity and ability to impose their will upon others. This man had many demons inside him who were fierce and who imposed their will upon him.

But there was an exorcist – Jesus, the Son of the Most High God. He was stronger than the demons and they knew it. When the man saw Jesus, he cried out in a loud demonic voice, “What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I beg you, do not torment me.” They feared that Jesus was there to cast them back into hell. Instead, Jesus casts these unclean spirits into a herd of unclean animals – pigs – which then rush over the steep bank into the lake where they were drowned.

The change after this exorcism is startling. The English text says that the man was “healed”. The word literally means that he was saved - not just that he was healed physically or emotionally. He has been freed by Jesus from the control of the demons. The people from the city who formerly feared this man find him clothed and sitting at the feet of Jesus, the posture for a disciple listening to his teacher. He is in his right mind now. Fear has been replaced with faith.

People may look at this account like they do a movie. It’s a cool story, but its not real. Maybe we are too jaded by the glut of special effects in movies to ever be frightened by something like this. Or maybe we are too sophisticated to ever believe that demon possession could actually happen today. People think that all this talk about demon possession is something for horror movies or comes from a time when people were not as enlightened as we are today.

But I have news for you: The devil is alive and well and demon possession still occurs today. It goes on all around us. We think that the evil in our world and the problems in our lives are the fault of other people, the result of bad luck, or due to poor choices that we have made. But that’s not the case. The Scripture says, “For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.” (Ephesians 6:11-12). Satan has control of this world and its inhabitants. Jesus calls him “the prince of this world” several times.

Satan possesses people, but the way that he does it has changed. He knows that we live in a scientific age where skepticism reigns. Therefore, he knows that he probably can't scare us with old fashioned demon possession. We've seen it all in the movies and wouldn't believe it if we saw it in real life. Now, he separates us from God in other ways. He possesses us through our possessions which can become the chief focus of our energy and our life. Satan controls us through sinful and addictive behavior which we cannot stop or get control of. He can even use good things to possess us. The Bible says, "Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light." (2 Cor. 11:14) Satan can use our family, our school, our careers, our entertainment to draw us away from God.

Before you know it, your possessions possess you; your sinful behavior controls you; and good things can deceive you and mislead you into believing that they are the most important things in your life rather than your relationship to God. Not only can we feel the pressure of this control, but, left unchecked, this possession of you by Satan will ultimately lead you "into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels."(Matthew 25:41)

But we have the ultimate exorcist on our side – Jesus, the Son of the Most High God. In the movie, *The Exorcist*, the only way for the young girl to be released from the demon's control was for the priest to take the demon into himself and then to die so that the demon could no longer hurt her.

In the same way, Jesus, the Son of the Most High God, came to this earth to take on Satan and all of his fury and anger. The Bible says, "Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil—and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death. (Heb. 2:14-15). Jesus endured all of the temptations of Satan in our place. Jesus experienced the assault of Satan through both his enemies and his friends. Jesus took on Himself all of the sin and evil in the world and suffered the punishment of physical and spiritual death for it. Only, instead of remaining dead like the priest in the movie, Jesus came back from the dead to live again. He took everything Satan had to throw at Him in order to possess Him and successfully endured it and overcame it.

By this, we have been freed from Satan's possession and control. Like the demon possessed man in our Gospel, we are not merely healed of the effect of this sin or that sin. We are saved from the curse of all sin and the control of the one who has control over death – the devil. In our baptisms, God takes possession of us and we become His own. That's the reason our baptismal rite includes the renunciation of the devil, his works, and his ways. This is reiterated by confirmands on confirmation day. It is not a promise we make to try and avoid the devil and do good. It is a declaration by God spoken through our mouths that the devil is no longer our master; his works are no longer our works; and his ways are no longer our ways. God is our master. His work of salvation is for us; and His ways have become our ways.

Like the demon possessed man in our story when Jesus, by the power of His word, casts out the demons from his life so that he can sit at Jesus' feet as His disciple, we, too, having been freed from Satan's control, sit at His feet as His disciples. Like the man who was clothed and in his right mind, we are clothed in Christ's holiness and in our right minds. Fear has been replaced by faith. We are truly free.

How do we live in that freedom? The man from the Gerasenes enjoyed sitting at Jesus' feet because He knew that, in the presence of Jesus, he was safe from further demon control. He desired this so much that he begged Jesus to let him go with Jesus and His disciples. But Jesus encouraged him, "Return to your home, and declare how much God has done for you."

It is the same for us. When we sit at Jesus' feet to hear His Word, we are safe from Satan's control and domination. That's why we eagerly flock here to this sanctuary. It's not to fulfill a religious duty or because we have to. We are here in this safe place to be safe.

When we make the invocation at the beginning of the service, using the words of the baptismal formula – "in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit" – we are reminded to whom we belong. It is not Satan and his demons. We are the children of God through our baptism. We are safe.

When we receive His absolution after the confession of our sins, we are reminded who is in control. It is not our guilt and our fears. Through the forgiveness of our sins, our guilt no longer controls us and our fears no longer dominate us. We are safe.

When we eat His body and drink His blood in Holy Communion, we are reminded whose power is ours. It is not Satan's power to hurt us. Rather, in the eating and drinking, we are joined to Jesus Christ. As the Scriptures promise, "the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world." (1 John 4:4). We are joined to His righteousness, His forgiveness, and His power as we live our lives. We are safe.

He simply tells us when we leave this place, "Return to your home and declare how much God has done for you." We are safe. Satan and his demons do not possess us, nor can they harm us. We are the Lord's and He only blesses us. Our lives are lived simply declaring all that God has done for us in Christ so that others might know and be freed from Satan's control as well.

Exorcism is not just something from Bible times, a superstition from an unenlightened past, or fodder for horror movies. Exorcisms happen all the time when the Word of God is shared, taught, and preached. People are freed from Satan's control. The chains of sin, and evil are broken.

Slavery to the fear of death is ended. One commentator put it this way:

Preaching the Word of Jesus – the message of the kingdom – conquers the demons. Through this activity, the kingdom is coming. The final banishment and eternal torture of the demons is yet to come. But they are in retreat. The preaching of the Word sends them from where they ought not be – inhabiting man, created to be son of God – into temporary refuge in places more appropriate: unclean swine and chaotic water. Let the seed take root in the hearer, producing confident faith: Jesus is the one sent from God to bring salvation to all people, and when the church proclaims his words and his deeds, the 'Son of God the Most High' rolls back the reign of demons and ushers in God's kingdom." (Arthur Just, *Condoria Commentary: Luke 1:1 – 9:50*, p. 367)

Thanks be to God! Amen.