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Trinity Episcopal Church

Isaiah 65: 1 – 9
Galatians 3: 23 – 29Psalm 22: 18 – 27
Luke 8: 26 – 39

“People learn to love their chains.” So says Daenerys Targaryen in the HBO series, Game of Thrones. She says this rather resignedly as she stands overlooking a slave city that she has endeavored to free but which doesn’t really want to be free. People learn to love their chains. [The Rev. Rick Morley] A sad commentary, but one that is perhaps true for many of us.

Today’s passage from the Gospel of Luke tells us about a crazy man living in chains among the tombs of a cemetery. This is a man without a country, or at least a city, and certainly without a life. Because he is always among the tombs, the man is perpetually, ritually unclean. The only humans with whom he seems to have contact are the people from the village who periodically attempt to restrain him in chains and shackles. But, like the Incredible Hulk, he snaps these chains and shackles like so many matchsticks.

The man is without clothing, without shelter, without food except for foraging, without friends or family, without anything that marks him as being human as we know it. Whatever the ‘demons’ are which cause him to morph into an impossibly strong, raving lunatic – they are many. In fact, Legion. A Roman legion of this time has 6,000 men in it, so the man must be filled to overflowing with a cacophony of voices, personalities and chaotic ideas that lead him to this uncontrollably destructive life. How does he continue to live, or even breathe, with such an unmanageable interior mob? The constant haranguing and the fragmentary life leave the man unhinged and utterly unconnected.

Until Jesus comes into the picture. Now, in between last week’s Gospel and today’s, Jesus has been wandering throughout Galilee with his ever expanding entourage. At some point, he tells the crowd the parable about seed falling on different kinds of soil. Then, privately, Jesus spells out the parable’s meaning to his disciples.

Soon after that, for a reason not stated, Jesus gets into a boat with his disciples and they begin to cross the Sea of Galilee, which is to say that they go to a foreign territory. Jesus falls asleep until his deeply agitated disciples rouse him in order to have him save them from the storm that is raging about them. The disciples wonder, “Who is this who can even control the chaos of the winds and the waters?” It’s after this ‘calming of the storm’ that Jesus and his disciples are safely delivered to the more rugged, bluff-lined, eastern side of the Sea of Galilee. Only to be greeted by this mad man.

No sooner does Jesus step ashore than he is accosted by the legion of demons within the convulsing man. Interestingly, the demons know the answer to the disciples’ question of “Who is this?” even if the disciples themselves do not. The demons know that they have more than met their match in Jesus, Son of the Most High God, and they are frightened.

After the demons call out to Jesus, he asks them their name. Now in the Bible, naming is a very important thing. To name something is to exercise control over it. In Genesis, when God calls the Light

“Day” and the darkness “Night,” it means that God is in control of them. In the second version of the creation story, when the man gets to name each of the animals that God forms, it says that the human has control over the animals. So for the demons to give their name to Jesus is for them to hand over their fate to him. Jesus does exactly what the demons request – he sends them into the pigs on the nearby hillside. The swineherds are so astonished by what happens to their herd that they run into town and tell everyone about what Jesus just did. Wanting to see for themselves, the townspeople rush back out to the edge of the hillside, only to find the pigs indeed gone, but the man returned to his sane, clothed self. Just as he stilled the storm raging out on the Sea, Jesus has stilled the storm raging within this man.

It is *then* that the people become afraid. Isn't it interesting that while the man is tearing about, possessed by demons, no one seems to be afraid? It's only after he is clothed and rational, sitting at Jesus' feet like any other good disciple, that the people become afraid. Perhaps, like the disciples in the boat, the townspeople are in terror of Jesus' power over dark forces. But it's just as possible that they are terrified because Jesus chooses to change their status quo. Jesus moves their cheese. Whatever kind of balance these people might have had in their lives with the presence of the demon-possessed man - however odd or tenuous that balance might have been - Jesus has upset the balance and there is a new normal.

Any of you who are familiar with systems theory, or any of you familiar with addiction and recovery, will recognize this dynamic. Basically, systems theory says that if you mess with one part of a system, the whole system is affected and the rest of the system will do its best to fight against change and maintain the status quo. For example, when someone begins to make progress in addiction recovery and is struggling to stay clean, family members, friends and associates will often, whether they realize it or not, work against the success of the person in recovery. Why? Because they are familiar with what has been, however crazy - and probably hurtful - that has been. But what is yet to be with the changed person remains uncharted territory. It's a case of the devil you know being preferred over the devil you don't. People learn to love their chains.

Jesus has freed the unnamed man from his demons, but the townspeople are still bound by their self-applied chains and shackles. They are not ready to move forward into a new but unknown future. They are upset that they have lost their livelihood of the pig herd, and they are upset by the power displayed by Jesus, even if it has helped this man. The man, however, is done with his chains and is quite ready to move forward and follow Jesus, and who can blame him? It might be hard for him to integrate back into the life in the town. But Jesus has other plans for him.

Has Jesus come to this side of the sea just for the purpose of healing this one man? Or perhaps to plant a seed in the hearts of some of the people there? Perhaps it is the hand of God reaching out to the Gerasenes. Listen again to part of our reading from the prophet, Isaiah, “I held out my hands all day long to a rebellious people...who sit inside tombs, and spend the night in secret places; who eat swine's flesh, with broth of abominable things in their vessels...” We don't know why Jesus makes this journey. However, in response to the cries of the crowd for him to go back where he came from, Jesus and his disciples get back in the boat and cross back over to Jewish territory.

This is such an odd story. What are we 21st century people supposed to do with it? The Rev. Dr. John Fairless, a Lutheran pastor, recounts a ministerial association gathering where the ministers of various Christian denominations discussed this passage. A Pentecostal pastor asked Dr. Fairless, with genuine interest and sincerity, "How do Lutherans feel about Jesus' ministry of healing and casting out demons?" To which Dr. Fairless politely replied, "That stuff scares most of us to death and we ignore it as much as possible!"

We can ignore it. Or we can take this passage and others like it literally, and thank God, through Jesus, for healing all that ails us, physically or otherwise. But acceptance of the story as fact isn't always that easy for some of us. As Fairless says, we can admit that perhaps there was an event in which Jesus provided healing for an emotionally disturbed man and it somehow involved a herd of pigs, but that's about as far as some of us are willing to take it.

Fortunately, we can find truth in the story whether or not we think or believe the facts are accurate. We are not really so different from those townspeople. We live in the ordinariness of every day. Most everything we experience is part of a cause-effect relationship. But not everything. Even with everything we have discovered about science and how we think the world operates, there are some things that are still a mystery, still inexplicable. There are those who would use God simply to fill in the gaps until those gaps are filled in by exploration and discovery (the God of the Gaps theory), but I am not one of them, and perhaps neither are you. For the record, I do believe in God's healing, which is why we do the laying on of hands every Sunday, but it remains a total mystery for me. Mystery reminds us of our need to be humble before God, that the further we go, the more we realize how many more questions we have and how much more there is that we don't know.

We are like the Gerasene townspeople (including the former demon-possessed man) in another way, too. We live lives filled with unpredictability, chaos and sometimes torment. Luke's Gospel calls us to trust in the one who arrives on our shore, bringing release from the chains with which we bind ourselves (and sometimes others), bringing peace from chaos, and bringing hope from torment. [the Rev. Dr. Fairless] The Good News is that we can trust in the One who enables and invites us to sit clothed and sane at his feet. We do learn to love our chains. But God, Jesus is ready and willing to snap them like so many matchsticks. Let us close with a prayer from the Rev. Jan Richardson. It's entitled:

Delivered – A Blessing

From the hundred wants that tug at us.

From the thousand voices that hound us.

From every fear that haunts us.

From each confusion that inhabits us.

From what comes to divide, to destroy.

From what disturbs and does not let us rest.

Deliver us, O God, and draw us into your relentless peace. Amen. +