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Episcopal Church of the Incarnation, Santa Rosa, CA

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Year C, Proper 7, Revised Common Lectionary

[Isaiah 65:1-9](#)

[Psalms 22:18-27](#)

[Galatians 3:23-29](#)

[Luke 8:26-39](#)

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I think one of the things people sometimes find challenging about the Bible is the stories about demons. It's hard to get around: there are lots of stories in scripture about people being possessed by demonic forces, and Jesus freeing them. In our culture demons aren't part of the everyday furniture of our imaginations. We don't see someone acting in harmful ways and think: demon. We tend to think: mental illness, or physical illness, or some kind of diagnosable problem. And rightly so, because science and medicine have given us great tools for that. So demons have largely been relegated to the world of the spectacular and fictional, as in movies like *The Exorcist*, good for escapism and shock value but not something we expect to encounter in our everyday world.

Yet it's funny because from another standpoint, one of the things about the Bible that is the most obviously true and that almost any of us can verify from simple experience is that there are evil forces in this world. St. Paul calls them "the cosmic powers of this present darkness" and "the spiritual forces of evil."¹ We can think of the demonic as the power of death; the power of destruction; the power of hatred and harm. One look at today's headlines or yesterday's history books is enough to realize that death and hatred and destruction are with us both in our lives as individuals and collectively as societies. We can be Pollyannas and say "Everyone is just trying to do their best and be nice and sometimes we don't always do it perfectly, we all make mistakes," but that doesn't do justice to a reality where a Hitler or a Stalin or a Pol Pot can be responsible for the murder of millions, or a slave trader can sell children away from their mothers, or a mass shooter can destroy both the lives of innocents and the sense of safety of a whole community. There is such a thing as active malevolence, the desire to harm. And sometimes we resist it, and sometimes we are overtaken by it, and sometimes we consent to it, and sometimes we are its victims or its perpetrators or both.

And so it is that in the vows we take at baptism, we are asked: "Do you renounce Satan and all the spiritual forces of wickedness that rebel against God?" and "Do you renounce the evil powers of this world which corrupt and destroy the creatures of God?" Our baptismal vows don't simply ask us to try to be nice. They don't shy away from the language of good and evil, of powerful forces bigger than we are, though not bigger than God. Our baptism enrolls us in a cosmic struggle whose outcome is known, for God cannot be defeated, but in which there is still much to be done, for evil is powerful in this world.

¹ Ephesians 6:12.

The man in our story from Luke is the victim of a demonic spirit of self-destruction. His violence is directed not at others but at himself. There are many people today who live as prisoners of mental illnesses or addictions or both whose story is very like this man's story of isolation and self-harm, beloved children and spouses and friends who have been driven into cycles of despair and woundedness. I don't mean to suggest that mental illness is the same as demonic possession or that addictions should be cured by holy water and crucifixes. Rather I simply mean that everything that destroys human life and flourishing, whether it's disease or addiction or our own free bad choices, is in some way a manifestation of the power of death in this world.

Jesus has come to confront that power. And it recognizes him: "What have you to do with me, Son of the Most High God?" And when he asks the name of this particular manifestation of the power of death, it replies, "Legion"—a charged word, because it means not just a large number but an army, and specifically a Roman army. This story takes place against a first-century background where an occupying army has claimed to bring order to the world through the power of the sword—but to those who live under it, that so-called "order" is really chaos and devastation. As one ancient observer of Rome said, "They call robbery empire; they make a wasteland and call it peace." So here in this name "Legion" we have a hint that Jesus' confrontation is not just with individual demons of self-destruction but also with wider demonic forces at a more collective level.

Militarism and empire can each be a kind of demon. As followers of Jesus we might be pacifists, or we might believe that there are times it can be justified to use force as a last resort in self-defense or the defense of others. But in either case we must be on our guard against the seductive narrative that war is something to be celebrated. And as followers of Jesus we might have an appropriate patriotism, a special love of the place we are from and a desire to see it thrive, but we must be on our guard against the seductive narrative that God loves us best and we are always the good guys destined to bring order and prosperity to lesser peoples. These characteristic demons of ancient Rome are prime examples of how evil often works: not as something obviously wicked, but as a twisting of what is good. Strength and discipline are good; so are love of place and people. But the demonic twists these into domination and violence. And those demons of militarism and empire hold much resonance for us today as residents of a country that is still the dominant superpower of our own time, and as we watch the unfolding events in Iran where so much is still unknown, praying for a real and lasting peace to prevail.

There are other societal demons we might name. This week we celebrated Juneteenth, marking costly victory against one of America's chief demons, the demon of racism as expressed in the institution of slavery that was present on this nation's soil for far longer still than it has been abolished for, a demon that was partially defeated only to morph into Jim Crow and still remains with us. This week we also marked the tenth anniversary of the murder of nine people by a white supremacist under the thrall of that demon at Mother Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina. The week before was the ninth anniversary of the murder of more than 40 people at the Pulse gay nightclub in Orlando by a man under the thrall of the demons of homophobia and religious extremism.

Jesus has come into this world to face the demonic powers of evil head-on, those that enslave us as individuals and those that enslave us as societies. Here in the country of the Gerasenes he frees one man from them, but this is not the climactic moment. The demons move on to the pigs, to a lesser evil, but they are still wreaking their chaos; Jesus's hour has not yet fully come. The true confrontation will come at the cross, when he will face the power of death and defeat it, not by force but by faithfulness, by gentleness, by the resistance that is love. It is into that loving resistance to evil that we have been baptized.

St. Paul tells us in our epistle today that all of us who have been baptized into Christ have been clothed in Christ. And I'm reminded of that scene at the end of the gospel story where the man is found "clothed and in his right mind." We might say that when we put on Christ in baptism we put on a new uniform; we become members not of a legion of death but of an army of mercy, of healing, of reconciliation.

May you be strengthened by the spirit of Jesus today to fight bravely against the powers of the devil, to hold fast to the love and mercy of God, and to live a life that is a living sign of reconciliation and healing in this world.