

## **Lions, and Tigers, and Bears...**

Sermon (Michael S. Jones)  
The Fifth Sunday after Pentecost  
Proper 7  
June 23, 2013

Isaiah 65:1-9  
Galatians 3:23-29  
Luke 8:26-39

*Lord Jesus, unbind [us] that [we] may love you wholly and walk in the freedom of your way of life and holiness. May there be nothing which keeps [us] from the joy of living in your presence.*

*May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer. Amen. [Psalms 19:14]*

*Jesus then asked him, 'What is your name?' And he said, 'Legion;' for many demons had entered him. And they begged him not to command them to depart into the abyss. Now a large herd of swine was feeding there on the hillside; and they begged him to let them enter these. So he gave them leave. Then the demons came out of the man and entered the swine, and the herd rushed down the steep bank into the lake and were drowned. [Luke 8:30-33, RSV]*

Demons, legions, swine, and an abyss; what's all that about? What does this have to do with Jesus, and what in the world could this passage of scripture be saying to us today? That was my reaction when I first read this lesson.

Demons, legions, swine, and an abyss... This part of the passage kind of reminds me of a line from *The Wizard of Oz*: *Lions, tigers and bears, oh my; lions and tigers and bears.* Well, strange as it may seem, *The Wizard of Oz* is an apt metaphor through which to examine today's Gospel lesson. So, sit back and relax for the next few minutes. *Dorothy, you aren't in Kansas anymore.*

It's a time honored classic, and most of us have watched the movie countless times. So you know what the story is about: There's this young girl (Dorothy) and her cute little dog (Toto). And while Dorothy loves her Auntie Em and her Uncle Henry, she is always dreaming about being somewhere else: in another time, in another place – where things are better, happier, and brighter – or as Dorothy would say, *somewhere over the rainbow*. But be careful what you ask for Dorothy...

The movie barely gets underway and Dorothy's demon starts to emerge. A lonely young girl in the care of her aging aunt and uncle who are so busy eking out a meager dust bowl existence that they hardly have time to pay sufficient attention to an imaginative young girl who is left to her own devices to understand, interpret, and make sense of the world around her.

While Dorothy is tormented right from the beginning by that mean old Mrs. Gulch – who wants to have poor little Toto destroyed for romping in her garden and who in the Land of Oz morphs into the Wicked Witch of the West. Mrs. Gulch is not Dorothy's demon. Dorothy's demon is not the Wicked Witch of the East either, who had the misfortune of standing under a falling house. And no, Dorothy's demon are not the Munchkins, Glenda the good witch, the scary forest, the band of friends she meets along the way to Oz, or the poppies that put Dorothy and her band of friends asleep on the outskirts of the Emerald City. Her demon are not the Emerald City dwellers, the Wizard, or the Wicked Witch's flying monkeys or singing guards either. All of these beings and creatures are either manifestations of the demon that haunts and possesses Dorothy throughout the story or the means by which Dorothy comes to understand her dilemma and through which it is resolved.

Fortunately for Dorothy and for many of us, much of the time, our demons are far less significant than the ones confronted by Jesus in today's Gospel reading from Luke. However, this small passage, strange as it might sound at first reading, is filled with lessons and metaphors for our consideration today.

In today's Gospel lesson from Luke, and in the account of this same encounter in Mark, the demon tells Jesus its name is "Legion." This is significant, as a Legion is not a small squad of soldiers, but rather an army 6,000 strong – a force to be reckoned with, that would have struck fear in the hearts of the people and terrified the people who had confronted the possessed man. Nevertheless, even though the possessed man was haunted by these evil demons, the man came to Jesus asking for mercy and to be released from the grip of these unclean spirits.

The take-away from this part of the Gospel lesson is that if we have faith in the redeeming power of God's grace, no power, no evil, no legion of demons, and no destructive force, nothing on Earth and under heaven is sufficient to separate us from the Peace of God which surpasses all understanding. As the Psalmist wrote in the Meditation on God as the protector of the faithful (Psalm 91:7, 9-10), *A thousand may fall at your side, ten thousand at your right hand, but it will not come near you. Because you have made the Lord your refuge, the Most High your dwelling-place, no evil shall befall you, no scourge come near your tent.*

I am also reminded of that passage of comfort and reassurance from Matthew (11:28-30) where Jesus bid the faithful: *'Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.'*

Before Jesus arrived and freed the man from the grip of these evil spirits, the man's neighbors would bind him with leg irons and chains, and keep him under guard. But these precautions did not work. The man would break free of his bonds, overcome his guards, and flee into the wilderness – perhaps a metaphor for the brokenness and isolation experienced by those who are in the grip of personal demons. But Jesus was no stranger to the wilderness – not only a place of beauty and wonder, but also a place where demons dwell. At the beginning of his public ministry, Jesus goes into the wilderness to pray and prepare for what lie ahead. At the end of his forty-day preparation of prayer and fasting, Jesus encounters the evil one who tries to break him. But Jesus would not succumb to Satan's temptations of power, position, and all the kingdoms under heaven. Instead Jesus admonishes the devil and sends him away.

So, Jesus has been there and done that. One of the meditations I read on today's Gospel reading put it very well. To paraphrase: Jesus understands the beauty and danger of wilderness. He understands the brokenness and isolation of that place; and because He too has been there, He can lead us out.

Now, what's up with the pigs? According to the Gospel passage, the demons begged Jesus to let them enter the swine that were feeding nearby. Jesus agreed, and the demons entered the swine and the herd of swine rushed down a steep bank into the lake and were drowned. Perhaps, the part about the pigs is a metaphor about The Prodigal Son; who after squandering his inheritance, was hungry enough that he was willing to eat pigs food – enough of a shock to make him realize his mistake, commit to amend his life, and return to his father and to God to seek forgiveness for his sins.

What about the swine drowning in the lake? Well, when it occurred to me that The Wizard of Oz was an interesting metaphor through which to examine this lesson, I thought I might have been the first to do so. However, I discovered I was not. Others suggested not only the connection with The Prodigal Son coming to his senses, but also the connection between destroying the Wicked Witch of the West by throwing water on her and destroying the demons by allowing them to enter the swine who then rush down the steep bank and drown in the lake; and suggested a metaphorical linkage with Baptism as a rite of exorcism.

And finally, why, after Jesus had done such a miraculous thing did the people ask him to leave? One commentator on this lesson suggests that perhaps the price of such liberation from the power of evil and sin was more than the people were willing to pay. Perhaps, unlike the possessed man, they were not ready to *own* their own demons and commit to a new way of life, the way of life represented by the very presence of Jesus. Fortunately, for the Gerasenes and for us today, the Lord is patient, and His love and grace is always available to those who turn unto Him.

To wrap up, as the Tin Man said to the Wizard – after he had received *a heart*, the Cowardly Lion *courage*, and the Scarecrow *a brain* – What about Dorothy? Well, what about Dorothy? While the Wizard did not have anything in his little bag for Dorothy, he already knew that what she desired did not lie over the rainbow, but rather at home in her own backyard. So, he decided to take her back to Kanas in his balloon. But Toto leaped out of Dorothy's arms to chase after a cat that one of the Emerald City dwellers was holding in her arms, and Dorothy jumped out of the balloon's gondola to retrieve him. Before Dorothy and Toto could return to the gondola, the rope securing it to the ground became untied and the balloon carrying the Wizard began its one-way journey back to Kansas without Dorothy.

Just as well, though, because Dorothy still had to *own* her own demon by appreciating and experiencing what she had lost by coming to Oz and seeking her heart's desire somewhere over the rainbow, before she could accept that she had the power to return home or, to put it in the context of the Prodigal Son, to come to her senses and realize that she already had all that she sought and all that she needed.

Of course, The Wizard of Oz is just a story. While it is true that in most cases we must recognize and *own* our own demons before we can be exorcised of them and healing can begin – clicking the heels of our ruby slippers three times as it were – it is an important beginning of the process, but not the solution. At one time or another, most of us or someone we know has or will be confronted by demons of one sort or another: Loneliness, fear, distress, physical or emotional pain, physical or mental illness, prejudice, remorse, depression, addiction to name but a few.

Earlier I said that Jesus understands the beauty and danger of wilderness. He understands the brokenness and isolation of that place; and because He too has been there, He can lead us out. Because He too has been there, Jesus can offer us what He found there: Wholeness, belonging, and new life. By the Grace of God, we do not have to face our demons alone. Through our faith in the redeeming grace of our Lord and Savior, Jesus' healing power will manifest itself in many ways: such as the pastoral counsel of our clergy; the confidential and caring support of one of our well-trained Stephen Ministers; care by a compassionate friend; personal and intercessory prayer; counseling, medical and other therapeutic care; or other appropriate interventions – all working as agents of God to bring hope and salvation.

*Lord Jesus, unbind [us] that [we] may love you wholly and walk in the freedom of your way of life and holiness. May there be nothing which keeps [us] from the joy of living in your presence.*

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Amen.