

It requires quite a stretch of the imagination to think that the man who is described in today's gospel lesson – he is possessed by demons and living naked and in chains in a cemetery – is intended to represent us, but at least consider the possibility. Our Holy Scriptures are designed to make us think. Sometimes scripture leads us to places in our mind where we might not always feel comfortable going. But scripture also and always reassures us that God's love greets us wherever we are in life

The man whom Luke describes is, to put it mildly, in a very bad way. The local community were afraid of him – and fear is a prevailing theme in today's gospel lesson. The locals are so afraid of this tormented man that they kept him chained up, outside of town, in the graveyard. The man is deranged. He obviously is suffering some form of mental illness. Night and day he cried out and gashed himself with stones.

As you know, encountering serious mental or spiritual illness in another person can be frightening. Sufferers may behave in a way that is unexpected, uncontrollable, even threatening. In this Gospel passage, everyone is afraid of something – everyone, except for Jesus.

When the tormented man 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.” Jesus asked the man his name and is told it is “Legion.” A Roman legion of soldiers consisted of as many as 6,000 men, which is Luke the gospel writer's way of telling us that the man was possessed by countless demons.

All of us carry within us throughout life our own assortment of demons: our fears, hurts, angers, regrets, temptations, limitations, difficult memories, and jealousies, to mention but a few, and probably more than we care to count. The unfortunate truth is that being human means being burdened by demons of some sort. They are unavoidable.

The story then takes a most unusual turn. Jesus commands the demons, the unclean spirits, to come out of the man. They enter a herd of pigs feeding on the hillside nearby. The pigs rushed down the steep bank into the lake and drowned. Soon thereafter the man is seated next to Jesus, fully clothed and in his right mind.

You might expect that this powerful and compassionate act of healing by Jesus would be welcomed by the local folk, but it was not. Now they fear Jesus. It was miraculous that Jesus had cured their neighbour, but the fact that someone could wield such spiritual power frightened them, and so they asked Jesus to leave. To go away. Possibly they wondered or feared what he might do next. Apparently, they did not think Jesus was safe to have around.

This was not the first time that Jesus had been asked to leave a place. After his inaugural sermon in his hometown of Nazareth, the townsfolk were so angry with him that they tried to throw him off a cliff. And he had done other things that made some people wary of him. He had once cursed a fig tree. He had thrown moneychangers out of the temple. He had associated with unsavory members of society. He told those who wished to follow him to leave their homes, their families, possessions, livelihoods behind in exchange for a cross. We are told that even some members of Jesus' own family thought he might be out of his mind. Lots of people thought that Jesus was not safe to have around.

Jesus also healed the sick, he embraced the outcasts, he called for justice, he proclaimed the good news of God's Kingdom, and he brought the gift of everlasting life to the world. But even then, some people did not think Jesus was safe, because his unprecedented example of sacrificial love upset the status quo and turned the world upside down.

As Christians, we are expected to take note and be inspired by what Jesus did for the man with the demons and all the other tormented people that he encountered. Jesus moved without hesitation into the lives of those who suffered from all manner of troubles. Jesus did not remain aloof. He reached

out, touched, healed. He did not simply offer kind words of consolation; he acted. He liberated people from their fears, and restored them to peacefulness.

As I have already said, fear is the pervasive theme in today's gospel story.

Mercer Mayer tells the story of a little boy who is afraid to go to sleep at night because the monster that he is certain hides in his bedroom closet might come out while he is asleep and get him. One night the boy decides to face the 'whatever-it-is' scary thing that dwells in the closet, and he remains awake, waiting in his bed armed with his trusty pop gun. To the boy's surprise, when a monster creeps out of the closet, it is the monster that is terrified and begins to cry. It turns out the monster had been hiding in the closet because it was afraid of the boy. At the end of the story, the boy and the monster peacefully fall asleep in bed together.

Even as adults we have our lists of fears that keep us awake at night. I've been told that we can never really run away from anything, least of all our fears, because whatever it is that is troubling us, that makes us fearful, is not outside of us. Fear rattles around inside of us, sometimes waking us in the depths of nighttime, filling our dreams with torment, echoing loudly in the emptiness within us. Fears that recall all the unfinished business of our lives, the tensions we never lifted, the relationships we never resolved, the promises we never kept, the dreams we never achieved, the things we never became, the enmities we never accepted. Our fears can become one loud cacophony of noise that stay with us wherever we are. We can never really run away from our fears, but with God's help we need not let our fears control our lives, enslaving and paralyzing us. God will meet us in our fears, calm and release us from our fears, any time we are ready to surrender them to God.

Did you notice the exchange between Jesus and the man once the man had been freed from his demons and his fears? Still uncertain what to do with his newly restored life, the man begged Jesus to let him accompany Jesus on his travels. We cannot say for certain why the man wanted to do that. Maybe it was out of a sense of deep appreciation for what Jesus had done for him, giving him back his life. Maybe it was simply his desire to move on and put his troubled and messy past behind him. Yet perhaps surprisingly, Jesus answered him, "No." Jesus instructed him to return home to his family and friends, "and tell them how much God has done for you."

Would that have been the answer the man was hoping for? To return home? Return to the people who knew him best, but until his healing had seen him at his raving lunatic worst? Presumably it would have been easier for the healed man to put his past behind him by heading out on the open road with Jesus to seek a new beginning far removed from the confused and sordid life he had once lived, naked and chained in a cemetery, an object of fear and scorn in his home community. Sometimes Jesus instructs us to undertake a similarly difficult assignment, which is to tell those closest to us what God has done for us.

So, we see the key teaching here: the intervention of Jesus granted the tormented man a new life, but not necessarily a new direction. There is a difference.

Christ intervenes in our lives – at least I believe that he does, and trust that you do as well – he intervenes in our lives to bring wholeness and completeness by removing our demons and fears. However, Christ intervening in our lives does not always lift us out of our difficult situations and circumstances entirely, does it? Sometimes our troubling circumstances do not change, but with God's help we are empowered to exist in them by replacing our fears with faithfulness, as people who have been transformed by the promised aid and comfort of God

I came across a prayer recently that speaks to our being open to God's healing power in our lives. I would like to conclude by saying it for us:

"We come to you, God, our Loving and Healing Parent, remembering the miracles of healing by Jesus.

We confess that sometimes we think of miracles as something that happened only long ago and far away.

We recognize that our hopes for healing are often plagued by our fears and crises of faith.
And sometimes, God, we are simply scared of how our lives would change if we were healed.
Help us willingly suspend our disbelief and fears.
Give us the faith to claim the healing you would have us enjoy.
Help us to see your healing grace in every day of our lives, even in our dying.
Open our hearts to the healing warmth of your presence. **Amen.**

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Rev. Dr. Keith Fleming