

“Holy Trouble”

Sermon from Matthew 8:28-34

**Given March 29, 2020, the Fifth Sunday of Lent
for the First Baptist Church of McMinnville**

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When Jesus landed at the Gadarene boundary, he encountered two demon-possessed people coming out of the tombs. They were so violent that no one could pass by there. “What do you want from us, Only Begotten of God,” they shouted. “Have you come to torture us before the appointed time?” Some distance away a large herd of pigs was feeding. The demons pleaded with Jesus and said, “If you expel us, send us into the herd of pigs.” Jesus answered, “Out with you!” With that they came forth and entered the pigs. The whole herd charged down the cliff into the lake and drowned in the water. The swineherds fled and, upon arriving in the town, told everything that had happened, including the story of the pair possessed by demons. Then the entire neighborhood came out to meet Jesus and implored him to leave the neighborhood.

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Before we left for our summer internship in Kenya, Courtney and I were prepped, and taught, and trained. We met with the students who had done the same internship the year before, who told us what to bring, and what to expect, and what side trips to take on our days off. We bought long skirts and sturdy shoes at Goodwill. We started taking our malaria medication weeks before we began our travel. We made up Kiswahili vocabulary flashcards and quizzed each other – realized we already knew the words for “thank you” and “friend” because

we'd seen *The Lion King* when we were teenagers. We knew there were things we didn't know, but we'd also been told, especially by the students who preceded us on this internship, that the people we'd meet were wonderfully welcoming, and patient, and would catch us up quickly on anything we needed to know.

And it was true. We landed and were greeted warmly, and spent our first couple of days in Kenya getting acclimated. We were shown the town, and the school, and the church; we were taken to the market; we were taken to homes of congregation members. We learned quickly to always have a prayer in our back pocket, and that it wouldn't hurt to have a sermon in mind, too, because we'd be called on at a moment's notice to speak. We learned about the importance of gift-giving – and how even people with very little would bring a gift to a friend at each visit, knowing that next time, they'd be on the receiving end, and their sacrifice would be repaid. We learned the word for “white people” – *mzungu* – we were the only ones in town, and the children shouted it at us whenever we walked by. And we learned how to cast out demons.

I gotta say, we knew we would learn a lot, and we were expecting to be surprised by much of it. We were not expecting that without 48 hours of our plane landing, one of our first lessons would be how to perform an exorcism. And our hosts were not expecting that we would come to them, two years into our training at a well-respected theological school, and not have any idea how to cast out demons. I mean, they were happy to teach us, but they were a little taken aback. And we thought, you know, this was something last year's interns might have mentioned to us.

But they didn't. And so we listened to our new hosts. It might happen at any time, we were told, that we would see signs of possession. And demons are strong. Their strength is something other-than-human. But prayer is stronger. And demons are cast out through prayer. So we practiced praying; we practiced praying like we believed our prayer could do anything; we practiced praying with more fervor and urgency and fierceness than we ever had in our polite American churches or our stuffy seminary classrooms.

It felt strange. Praying like that felt strange on my tongue. Thinking like that felt strange to my theology. I didn't know if I

believed in demons. I'd never considered it before this on-the-ground training.

And, of course – whether or not I believed in demons didn't really matter.

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New Testament scholar John Dominic Crossan admits he doesn't believe in demonic possession – doesn't believe, as he puts it, “that there are personal supernatural spirits who invade our bodies from outside and replace or jostle for place with our own personality. But,” he writes, “the vast, vast majority of the world's people have always so believed, and according to one recent cross-cultural survey, about 75 percent still do.” And saying you don't believe in demons, or I don't believe in demons, does nothing to address, or negate, the experience people all over the world have that cause them to attribute strange and scary occurrences, in their own bodies or in their experience of their neighbors, to demonic possession.

It's been suggested that much of what's named in scripture as demonic possession is what we might today call severe mental illness, and that it has connections to profound trauma in the

life of the person so affected. And if a person is their society writ small, then traumas suffered by the collective might also manifest in the lives of the individual.

So Crossan suggests that an occupied country has a multiple personality disorder. One part of it must hate and despise the oppressor, but the other must envy, and even admire, its superior power. This complicated relationship is a survival mechanism, and in the first-century mind, there was a connection between demonic possession and colonial oppression. Think back to today's scripture – turn to it if you have it nearby. A parallel, and longer, story is found in Mark's gospel – in that one, the demon, who is both one and many, calls itself "Legion" – the term used to refer to a unit of 5,000 members of the Roman army. So this story, Crossan suspects, would've delighted a Jewish audience: the occupying army is cast out, and into a herd of pigs, that most unclean of all Judaism's unclean animals, and then is cast into the sea – there's not a better ending for these people who have suffered so much and for so long under that imperial occupation.

But there is a better ending for the pig farmers. Or, a differently-hoped-for ending.

There is no denying here that with this exorcism, Jesus solves one problem but creates other troubles.

Maybe a reader is expected to cheer Jesus' intervention here? But the people in this town do not appreciate it. They want Jesus to leave the neighborhood, our version of the text says.

Which is also how the community dealt with these two among them who were so troubled. They were asked to leave the neighborhood. They were relegated to the outskirts of town. They were violent, and people were afraid of them. In Mark's version they'd been chained up. Here, it says they made their home among the tombs. They were hardly even part of the land of the living.

And when that changes – when the demons are cast out, and these two are made safe for company again, when it's possible for them to be restored to community – the townspeople don't celebrate that. They don't know yet what it means. They know that the arrangements they'd gotten used to have been disrupted, that their patterns and judgments have been upended, that their economy has been destroyed as part of this

disruption, and they just want the guy responsible for all the chaos to leave town.

They're troubled by how different things will be now. It appears, on the surface, that they'd have preferred to let these people continue to suffer, and keep their economy intact, rather than be the recipients of this turn of events. But a disruption of the economy also causes people to suffer. It's not such a clean distinction. Those people out among the tombs were disturbed, to be sure. And the town had figured out a way to live with the disturbance – or, to live near it, anyway, and to not think too hard about the implications of its nearness, or the call that came to them each day through the garbled and desperate words of the people living on the edge.

This story makes me wonder: What have we learned to live with? Where are the desperate voices we tune out, just to make it through the day undisturbed? Who are the folx we implore to leave our neighborhoods? Whose lives are considered expendable if it means the continuation of the economy, if it means the undisturbed perpetuation of life as some of us know it? These are not only questions of Biblical times, as our news just this week makes clear.

And then this story makes me wonder: Do demons only rage on the outskirts of town, in loud and unruly and isolated incidents? And if so, what is the name we give to the powers that rage underneath ordinary life-as-we-know-it, that sustain a system that only persists because some of its participants suffer, a system that both depends on and denies that suffering? What do we call that kind of violence?

And how do we call it out? When we troubled enough by the injustices that define our everyday existence that we attempt to expel them, how do pray in that way? Where have you seen that kind of trouble give rise to holy work? Where is the store of courage and love we can call up that will meet those powers head on?

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I never did cast out a demon during my internship. The need did not arise. I can't say I'm sorry, or what would've happened if I was faced with that phenomenon. But some difficult memories of that time do linger, do still trouble me.

I remember sitting with a woman for afternoon tea when, without warning, she hiked up her skirt and revealed deep scars marking her legs. I asked her if she wanted to talk about it, and she laughed. Not at my question. At the memories. She laughed as she told me the stories. They were horrifying. At one point I cut in, I said, “This isn’t funny.”

And she held my gaze for a moment, and told me, “I laugh so I don’t cry,” and then threw her head back in more giggles. It all seemed so distorted, so disjointed, the way her tone and her words didn’t match at all. I wondered what would’ve happened if she had been able to cry.

I didn’t realize how common her answer to me that afternoon was until I returned home to the US, eager to read more and study more, to learn more about this country where I’d left a piece of my heart, and I found a collection titled *I Laugh So I Won’t Cry: Kenya’s Women Tell the Stories of Their Lives*, a collection the author named in that way because of how many times she heard the women she was interviewing repeat that refrain.

Is there evil we just laugh at these days, because we feel too exhausted and powerless to mount any other response?

This text raises more questions for me than it answers. These days, too – these days raise all kinds of questions, about who we are and will be, about what we can live through and how, about the care we give and hoard, for ourselves and our neighbors and the world, about what will happen to those who already live on the edge. And those questions, I think, I hope, are what the church can be about in these days.

In *Holy Disunity*, our Lenten study book, Layton Williams asks: “What if the church became a place where we were all welcomed into confronting that which troubles us and that which should trouble us? And then, having seen the painful truth, might we finally be able to hear what God is calling us to do about it?....Our discomfort carries a message. That which troubles us seeks to tell us the truth. Will we learn to listen?”

Friends, my prayer is that we will. Amen.