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Sermon: June 2, 2013
Beverly E.C.C., Chicago, IL

“UNHOLY FEAR”
Luke 8:26-39

- {Is 61:1-2; Lk 4:18-19}

**“The Spirit of the Lord is on me,
because he has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim freedom for
the prisoners
and recovery of sight for the blind,
to set the oppressed free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”**

This is the text Jesus uses when he preaches at his hometown of Nazareth. His sermon is both inaugural address *and* elevator pitch. He publicly announces his ministry goals *and* he invites his listeners to join his team and help fulfill his mission.

{Jn 10:10; Lk 10:27; Lk 9:23-24} Christ’s message is a rousing call to embrace **“life...to the full”** by learning to **“love the Lord your God with all your”** being and **“your neighbor as yourself”** – and a bracing challenge **“to save [your] life”** by denying yourself, taking up your cross and following him.

No wonder {Lk 4:20} **“the eyes of everyone in the synagogue [are] fastened on”** the Messiah! His vision explodes with meaning and possibility. It is the polar opposite of status quo religion that blinds the eye, closes the ear, dulls the mind, and sedates the soul.

“Good news to the poor... freedom for the prisoners... recovery of sight for the blind,” liberty for **“the oppressed,”** and **“the Lord’s favor.”** Isn’t it exhilarating? Doesn’t it kindle your imagination, ignite your passion, inspire you to greater love and service?

Yet Christ and his mission provoke a completely different response from some people.

- Please turn with me to Luke 8:26-39.

- {Lk 8:22-23} The disciples have had a rough day. Some hours ago they boarded a fishing boat and set out to cross the Sea of Galilee. An intense **“squall came down the lake,”** and the boat **“was nearly swamped.”** **“They were in great danger.”**

- {Mk 4:38; Lk 8:24; Mk 4:39} The Lord Jesus was with them, asleep on a cushion in the stern. They shook him awake, shouting **“Master, Master, we’re going to drown!”** **“He got up, rebuked the wind and said to the waves, ‘Quiet! Be still!’ Then the wind died down and it was completely calm.”**

- {Lk 8:25} **“In fear and amazement they asked one another, ‘Who is this? He commands even the winds and the water, and they obey him.’”**

- By the time they reach the eastern shore in verse 26, the panic of the near drowning is behind them. The fear of the Messiah’s incredible power has faded to awe. Their heart rate has finally returned to normal, their breathing has slowed, and they are no longer bathed in cold sweat.

{Mk 5:5} Just then, the moment they pull onto shore, an inhuman scream pierces the air and a weird

figure jumps out at them. He is completely naked. His eyes are wild. His hair is unkempt. His body is covered with scars and bruises and lacerations because he compulsively beats and slashes himself with stones. He reeks of mud and sweat and urine and excrement.

He is a caricature of a man. Demons have abused him for so long that he's more of an animated carcass or a ghoulish marionette than a human being.

■ {Lk 8:29} Instantly, Jesus “[commands] **the evil spirit to come out.**”

■ Verse 28: The demoniac “[cries] **out and [falls] at his feet,**” not in holy reverence but in unholy terror. He “[shouts] **at the top of his [lungs], ‘What do you want with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God?’**”

{Lk 4:34; Jn 1:14} Like all demons, they know that Jesus is “**the Holy One of God,**” “**the one and only Son, who [has come] from the Father, full of grace and truth.**” Yet his presence does not exhilarate them, it nauseates them. His mission does not provoke their enthusiasm but their resistance.

■ Verse 30: “**Jesus [asks] him, ‘What is your name?’**” I think he is speaking to the human host, but the man's identity is so shattered, his self is so lost under layers of confusion and disorder and chaos, that it is the demon who answers.

“**‘Legion,’ he [replies], because many demons [have] gone into him.**”

■ Their interaction with the Savior is defined by abject fear. Using their human host the way a ventriloquist uses a dummy, in verse 28 they shriek: “**I beg you, don't torture me!**” In verse 31 they repeatedly beg Messiah “**not to**

order them to go into the Abyss,” {Rev 20:1-3} the prison in which Satan will one day be imprisoned. And in verse 32 they plead with him “**to let them go into**” the “**large herd**” of swine that is “**feeding there on the hillside,**” evidently because they are afraid of being disembodied.

■ {Lk 8:32-33} The Lord gives his permission. The demons go into the pigs and, since they have come {Jn 10:10} “**to steal and kill and destroy,**” the whole “**herd, about two thousand in number,** [rushes] **down the steep bank into the lake**” and drowns.

The Savior has blessed this man with “**good news**”! He has declared his release, given him “**sight,**” “**set [him] free,**” and announced to him the time “**of the Lord's favor.**”

■ In verses 34-37 the pig herders “[run] **off and [report]**” to the people in Gergesa and the surrounding countryside “**what [has just] happened.**” The people “[come] **out to see**” for themselves “**what has happened**” and “[find] **the man from whom the demons [have] gone out, sitting at Jesus' feet, dressed and in his right mind; and**” what?

Are the Gerasenes exhilarated by this miracle? Are they filled with wonder and gratitude that a man has been liberated from terrible bondage? No! “**They [are] afraid**”!

Let's put their fear in context with a few facts.

★ Fact 1) the former demoniac is one of them.

In verse 27 Luke says the man is “**from the town.**” Gergesa is a stable, tightly-knit community. Almost everyone lives and dies within a few miles of

their birthplace. Some in this crowd have known this man from birth.

Not only so, most of these villagers are related to each other by blood or by marriage. It is almost a given that he has cousins or siblings in the crowd.

★ Fact 2) the former demoniac has suffered terribly.

Every evil spirit strives to expunge God's image from its prey. It inflicts maximum pain and degradation until its host is reduced to a spent husk. Then they discard him or her for another victim.

It is good and right to recoil in dread from the demon inside the man. But anyone with an ounce of decency will have deep compassion for his victim.

★ Fact 3) while he was possessed, the former demoniac was a clear and present danger.

■ According to verse 29, the townsfolk have tried to chain him **“hand and foot and [keep him] under guard.”** {Mk 5:3-4} They used to do this **“often,”** but more recently **“no one [has been able to] bind him.”** He has torn **“the chains apart and [broken] the irons on his feet. No one [has been] strong enough to subdue him.”** It has been like living next door to drug addict, sociopath, and rabid dog all rolled into one.

The former demoniac is one of them, and he has suffered terribly. This, in and of itself, is good reason to rejoice at his healing. As if that weren't enough, this miracle has saved the community from danger.

■ We expect the voyagers to be relieved, exhilarated, joyful; instead, **“they [are] afraid.”** Consequently, in verse 37 **“all the people of the region”** (with the exception of

the former demoniac) ask **“Jesus to leave them, because they [are] overcome with fear.”**

This is not the natural fear the Twelve felt in the storm and when the demoniac jumped out. It is not the holy fear they felt when Jesus calmed the storm and defeated the evil spirits. This fear is akin to that which churned in the demons when the Lord drew near.

{bible.org} **“They [are] frightened by the good thing which [has] happened... They would rather that Jesus go away...than...remain among them... They would rather have the demoniac as he once was – even though”** he was dangerous – **“than to have him...sane, clothed, and a contributing member of society.”**

The newly liberated man does not fear the Lord, not in that way. He **“[begs] to go with him, but Jesus ... [says]: ‘Return home and tell how much God has done for you.’”** Meanwhile, the Messiah and his disciples sail back to Galilee.

“Good news to the poor... freedom for the prisoners... recovery of sight for the blind,” liberty for **“the oppressed,” “the Lord's favor.”** *Who doesn't want to be a part of that?*

{Lk 4:28-30} People like the Jews of Nazareth who tried **“to throw [Jesus] off [a] cliff”** when he revealed that God's kingdom is open to Gentiles. They preferred to stick with status quo religion that blinded their eyes, closed their ears, dulled their minds, and sedated their souls.

People like Gergasene Gentiles who asked him to leave. They preferred the familiar old life where there was no good news for the poor, no freedom for prisoners, no recovery of sight for the blind, no liberty for the oppressed, no time of the Lord's favor.

Two observations:

✦ 1st, few people are totally possessed as the Gerasene demoniac was, yet many are influenced by demonic thought. Their influence is seen in unholy fear that causes people to reject Jesus, and in resistance toward his kingdom and its mission.

✦ 2nd, if that's what demons do then we had better do the exact opposite! We want to draw near to Jesus in reverence and love! Amen?! We want to serve and manifest the kingdom of God! Amen?!