

4th Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 7c
Isaiah 65:1-9
Church
Galatians 3:23-29
Luke 8:26-39

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At our house the classic Star Wars movies live on. There's a memorable scene near the end of *The Empire Strikes Back* when one of the heroes, Han Solo, is captured by the evil Darth Vader. Instead of killing him outright, the evil leader takes Han Solo hostage and encases him in carbonite, a substance like black steel that's placed in a freezing chamber. And that's where the movie ends — with young and dashing Harrison Ford paralyzed inside a carbonite slab, hanging vertically in deep-freeze hibernation. It's creepy, because you know there's a living being inside that metallic slab. You can see the outline of his body, even his facial features, but that living person is imprisoned, immobilized, at least until the next movie begins.

There's an odd similarity to today's Bible reading. Like Star Wars, this Bible story is full of epic drama and special effects: A man possessed by demons, not just one but a whole Roman legion of demons, like 6000 evil soldiers tormenting him from within. There's Jesus spectacularly confronting the forces of evil. A whole herd of possessed pigs plummeting to their deaths. Plenty of big personalities here, but the great question mark at the center of it all is the man whose life was changed.

He's like Han Solo encased in carbonite. Nobody has really been able to get to know this man. His condition was so severe that he had to be restrained in chains under guard, and even so he would escape and run wild. Perhaps we've known people like this whose personalities have become so distorted that it's difficult to reach them any more. It's incredibly sad to know that there's a person inside, someone you care for, who's not able to function in a normal way. And maybe you've even thought: this is what demon possession must be like. Like they've been taken over by something that's distorting and suppressing the person they were created to be.

It's not far from the ancient worldview. Demon possession was understood as the total control of a person by a hostile, non-human source. Exorcism was the act of freeing that person through the power of God's kingdom, restoring them to themselves, other people and God. (exegetical notes, Pr. Joan Beck)

Which is exactly what Jesus did. Jesus was able to see this man from God's perspective. He was able to see the person beneath the symptoms, and he set that inner person free. Townspeople were astonished to find the man, not naked but clothed, not ranting but in his right mind, not pacing but sitting at Jesus' feet just like anybody else, listening, learning, respecting the teacher.

And Jesus returned his respect. Did you notice what happened there at the end? The man begged to be allowed to get in the boat with Jesus and travel on, become his disciple. But Jesus had something more in mind. *You are my disciple, Jesus said, and you have your own assignment:* “Return to your home and declare how much God has done for you.” (v. 39)

Can you imagine the privilege? And the *challenge*? Leaving with Jesus would be a lot easier than going back to face those people who’d scorned you and been terrified of you all those years! But this man had a powerful experience to share, and Jesus trusted him to tell it, needed him to tell it, commissioned him precisely because this man knew what it is to be a prisoner and what it is to be set free.

So this story is not just about healing but about discipleship. It’s not just about being made right with God, but God going on to make other people right through the one who’s been restored. That’s how disciples are born. We are changed by Jesus-- forgiven, set free-- and we are commissioned to let these holy changes change the world.

Lord knows it’s needed. Plenty of people know what it’s like to be possessed, needing to be set free for abundant life with others and with God.

We don’t talk much about demons today, but we know plenty of conditions that can possess or overwhelm a person, causing them to feel like occupied territory with foreign forces invading and oppressing and distorting. Cancer is sometimes spoken of as a hostile power that has invaded and must be battled, driven out. In a recent book, depression is called *The Noonday Demon* (Andrew Solomon, 2001, Pulitzer finalist) symbolizing the mental health struggle in a similar way. Addiction, too – people sometimes describe the journey of recovery in terms of fighting demons, resisting the power of those old destructive habits, one day at a time.

Reflecting more widely, we can name all kinds of influences that threaten to take people over or possess them. The force of greed can be consuming, or the driving power of ambition. The influences of jealousy or fear or bitterness or hatred can twist and distort lives.

As the One who meets his people in prayer, in the Word of scripture, Jesus is still confronting these forces and many others -- any force that distorts human life and makes us less than what God created us to be. In fact, it may be that it is in those places where people are the most wounded or imprisoned, the most bound or constrained, that we see Christ’s saving power the most clearly.

A friend told of a man from his church who has a mental illness that’s really debilitating. Over the many years he’s known this man, he has never been strong and free, always fragile and vulnerable, sometimes better, sometimes worse. But

my friend says this man is also the strongest witness to *hope* in the whole congregation. When he reads something that gives him encouragement, he shares it all around. When he has an uplifting experience, he lets people know. Nobody in that church depends upon God more powerfully day by day. Nobody cares more about how God sees and recognizes the living person beneath the symptoms. On his better days this man clings to the truth that God knows him, God values him, God never gives up on him. And on his worse days, he allows the community of faith to believe in that truth for him and carry him along. They value the way this vulnerable man witnesses to Christ.

Years ago I knew a woman who was abused as a child and wounded in ways that permanently damaged her. Her intelligence was limited, and because she hadn't been treated kindly, she didn't know how to treat other people kindly. But was she ever devoted to her church! It was the one place she belonged. And she knew this wasn't because church people were so nice. She knew she belonged because God is gracious. She knew her Bible, leaned on its promises, and she loved the passage we read today from Galatians: *"There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus."* (Galatians 3:28) What this vulnerable woman knew for sure is that nobody is disqualified from God's love. No matter what our differences are, no matter what our burdens are, no matter what prisons we've been trapped in, we are all welcomed and valued in God's family. She was a person whose problems made her witness that much more powerful. Like the man set free from the demons, she knew for sure what God had done for her. And she reminded the rest of us.

I certainly don't mean to romanticize this-- anything but-- yet isn't it a mysterious truth that people who bear the scars of human woundedness also have the capacity to be amazingly useful and valuable witnesses to God. Both the woundedness and the healing are part of our equipment for serving Christ.

That's why it was so important for that man who was set free from the demons to go back and tell his story, in his words. His experience shaped his ministry, just the way it shapes our ministries. Because in a similar way, each of us knows the places where we have been imprisoned and bound. We know the places where God has touched our lives, set us free, healed us, forgiven us, made us more whole, and perhaps we also have a hunch how these experiences contribute to shaping the way we serve God.

I'm thinking of someone who was abused long ago by an adult he trusted, in a community where he should have been safe. Now he does trainings in schools to help them become safer places for all kids. I'm thinking of someone who survived cancer, who now volunteers in a hospital library where cancer patients come to look for information and support. I'm thinking of a guy who used to do drugs and is now working as a drug abuse counselor, because he knows the terrain of that particular

abyss. Someone who grew up on food stamps who now does advocacy for the Oregon Food Bank. Someone who spent some time out of work and now is willing to take a chance on hiring others who have gaps in their resumes.

The list could go on and on, because so often that's how God works. Christ meets us in our own places of need and weakness, and there God fills us with the goodness and truth and unconditional love of our Creator. And from those places where God's kindness touches our need, God draws us into expressing God's kingdom of truth and healing and compassion and goodness.

Jesus brings release to the captives. In this, God transforms our way of seeing others and frees us to honor the mystery of how God is at work in the people around us. The hurting people. The needful people.

Jesus brings release to the captives. In this, God frees us to see how God is at work in us. In the hurting people that we are. In the people of need that we are. In the vulnerable, grateful people we are, who have been graced with God's undeserved, unconditional, unending love. The very place of our own pain and need is the place where Jesus Christ touches us, frees us, heals us, and calls us to join in God's healing, freeing, kingdom movement.

Thanks be to God. Amen.