

Running From Demons

1 Kings 19:1-15; Luke 8:26-39

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Ken Lovett, God bless him. I think it's only fitting that the first sermon following his last Sunday, begins with him: our mutual friend, who we all already miss dearly. I mentioned last week at his retirement that Ken taught me and Cindy about Church-time and how to properly keep it. We started hanging banners out front signaling the different seasons, do you remember? I started wearing these colorful stoles, as can you see. But more, we started to frame our services around Word and music for the time we were in. What that meant in practice, at least for preaching, was that we would also rely on the Lectionary texts, a calendar of pre-chosen passages, compiled by minds beyond our own, for churches to collectively read and pray and preach from, Sunday after Sunday, week after week.

Before using the lectionary, we would sort of self-select passages, the ones we felt were either interesting or fitting to whatever was happening in the news or series we were teaching. And while that could be said to be more freeing and creative and spirit-led, it was also probably un-Barthian, a little un-Presbyterian, and therefore un-Bill-Cobbian. Ministers should first hold fast to the words of scripture, Karl Barth argued, rather than the words of scripture folding into the whims and opinions of humans. Instead of leafing through the Bible then, locating a passage here or there that might work within our pre-selected themes, with the lectionary it's already chosen for us, which creates not only a stronger hermeneutical discipline but also a shared continuity with other congregations who are also reading these texts today. And so simply stated, it's simply simpler, and more collaborative, and saves us a lot of prep-time. So in the end, thank you, Kenny! Xoxo.

But just because it's simpler, my friends, doesn't mean that it's easier. Sometimes you get stuck with lessons you don't necessarily want to preach on, or hear; and worse, lessons you might not want to preach on **again**, or hear now several times over. You see, I've been saddled with these two lessons from 1 Kings and Luke 8 for a fourth time now, each time the lectionary has found itself here in "Year C." And though there are no doubt ministers out there who have been saddled with these passages for the seventh, eighth, or ninth time, please allow me this momentary blip to be somewhat salty. I was really hoping for something more chipper today! I mean my father drove from Jersey just for this! And so if you forgive me, I'll forgive you if you too are groaning saying, *oh, here we go again.*

But it's not that these aren't important or interesting lessons. They are, in fact, and in spades. It's just that it feels like I preached it before, and you heard it before, and nothing came of it. We're all still here. Dealing with the same issues. The same junk. But maybe that's the point: that we have to keep hearing it, again and again, until we see and go about making change. Last time, my sermon was titled "It Is Enough" employing Elijah's direct quote as he wilts under a broom tree, tired and depressed about the turn of events that have chased him down. My sermon was mostly about gun violence as it directly followed the shooting at the Pulse Night Club in Orlando, which John referenced in his excellent address last week.

And yet here we are, three years later, with these exact texts once again, and still nothing has changed. Except, everything has changed, as Austin once said, because little children are now dead and families are forever broken because of our lack of change and inaction. It is enough, the prophet cried. It is enough, we must cry. But since John spent some considerable time with all of that last week, I thought it best to pivot slightly today, and focus on Legion who's called out by name by Jesus in Luke. About those demons that are harbored in each of us, that are desperate to stay in control of us, that sometimes we are afraid to have exorcised out of us.

Demons, you say? Now personally, I struggle with the notion of the supernatural demon, so believe me when I say I'm not talking about Balrog from the Lord of the Rings here. I honestly don't even believe that sort of demon exists, outside of books and movies. Which, I get, is a bit convenient, for after all, if I can believe in a supernatural, all-loving deity, why is it so easy to dismiss the existence of evil entities beyond our realm of understanding? Good question and I'm not sure I have a good answer. I guess I just mostly feel that the "demons" that exist about us, are the demons we ourselves have created in us, through free-will in a fallen state. And so, for me, "demons" tend to take on the appearance of sins, or vices, or the pains caused by others, or the ones we've caused in others, or the self-inflicted traumas that haunt us from within. So when we talk about demons today, my friends, that's more or less the sort I'm conjuring. And I think that's who approached Jesus in our text today...a man who was inflicted not with a dark winged creature perhaps, but a man who was troubled by great emotional and mental torment, both around and within him.

But what are those kind of torments? Those that would affect not just him, but us. What might they look like? Well, for starters, there's always the obvious: drug and alcohol abuse, sex and infidelity, racism, bigotry, misogyny. Those are perhaps the most talked about demons, the torments that destroy us individually and collectively.

But then there's things like gambling... be it at the casino, or at crypto (oof), or in the career and fiscal decisions we make for ourselves and our families. And how about lies? The lies we tell to keep others at bay. The lies we speak to keep others misinformed. The lies we spread to hurt others and maintain our dominance. The lies we've created to build ourselves up upon fabrications. I mean just think about the torment that must come when you know the life you are living, and the person you are living it with, is also a lie.

And what about fear, or regret and longing, guilt and envy? The things we did. The things we should have done. The words we said, the words we shouldn't have said. These what-if's can stay with us for a lifetime, and haunt us in our memories. Can't you see then why this man in Luke was so desperate for healing? To get rid of all these demons? It is said that he had no clothes, that he lived in no house... it was as if you could see right through him. I mean is there a more terrible depiction of alienation than that?

Legion is the name my friends, for they are many. And they are desperate to control us and veer us off our path. And the work we must do to vanquish them is frequently perceived too great and too hard, that too often we just let them win; and so they continue to eat away at us, or shoot our children in their classrooms, because we are too apathetic under our broom trees and would rather die old and full of days.

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Just as the lectionary has taken liberty to repeat itself today, let me repeat myself again and tell you about one of my favorite television shows called “LOST.” I promise I’m not collecting royalties. The one remaining hub-cap on my 2014 Prius is hopefully proof enough of that. I’ve mentioned it only about twenty times before, but it is a good show. Perhaps not a great show, but for the era and channel it premiered on, it deserves praise. Praise perhaps most for its first season and for its later presented theme of “whatever happened, happened.” You can’t change the past, the mantra went. Characters are met bruised and broken, and through a series of flashbacks you begin to understand why. Several of them try to run from who they were, from what they did, from the demons that chased them. But they can’t get away, they can’t escape what has already happened. The only real choice, the show presents, is to come to terms with everything, and to try to forgive and reconcile. And in the end, it’s only if and when they learn acceptance, and try to change their path not from the past but from the present onward into the future, that they are able to move on or forward.

In much the same way, that’s the situation Elijah finds himself in. We see him running from Jezebel who seeks to kill him, out of revenge for what he first did to her and her people (he killed most of her prophets). He tries to flee, but then realizes it’s useless. His actions have caught up to him and now he believes he must meet his fate. He asks God to die, and even after God sends an angel to encourage him out of that state, he asks to be left alone, as if his demons were just too great to overcome. ...But then he confesses, **he confesses**, saying he is no better than his ancestors, and when he comes to this realization, and speaks it into existence, it’s then that he begins to be changed. To be restored. He eats the food in front of him. He gets up at the angel’s command. And he finds the strength to continue on and forward in the Lord’s employ.

And in much the same way, that’s the place we find ourselves in. We will continue to be chased and hunted by our demons, the ones we’ve named and those we left nameless, until we confront them. Until we own up to them. Until we confess them. And then ask and allow for someone like an angel to help us silence and defeat them. Mortal, human, sinners as we are, I believe we are all mentally or emotionally ill, in some way or another, and all of us would do better by seeking assistance. By asking for and getting help. But too often we stigmatize it and fashion it as a sign of weakness; and as men, we pretend it’s an indictment against our masculinity (toxic masculinity, talk about a demon!).

Life would be so much better if we prioritized not gain, or physical strength, or social status, but our mental health and our communal well-being. Like wouldn’t it be great if when we came home, we interpreted “Hey honey, how was your day” as an occasion to talk about how we processed it, and felt it, rather than the minute-by-minute minutiae of went on and who we had lunch with? And wouldn’t it be awesome if say on a report card, parents saw not just marks for Math and English, but marks for generosity and compassion? And how about instead of assigning our teens hours upon hours of isolating busy-work at home, they spent an extra hour in class to talk about what they might be going through, while listening to others?

And then imagine if as adults we fathered and exemplified that it’s okay to get hurt, that it’s okay to cry, that it’s okay to be humble and sometimes wrong, seeking help when needed and

someone to talk to when lonely. Rather than procreating lonelier and angrier little demons, perhaps if we did more of this, and just did better, all these shootings and all these bullies, might finally decrease or stop outright.

You know what's terrible, that is, besides all this? In Luke 11, just three chapters from ours, Jesus is once again seen exorcising demons, but what does he get for his troubles and his care? An accusation that he himself must be a demon, for it is said that only those with the power of Beelzebub can cast out demons from another. How ridiculous and sad! And yet, this is the same sort of mentality plaguing so many minds and school boards today. Educators just trying to help, to assist our more vulnerable kids, and now they're being labeled as groomers and deviants. It's disgusting -- we would rather condemn the Prince of Peace and his living disciples, making up whatever excuse we can to demonize them, rather than looking in the mirror and into our own eyes and removing that giant rotting log.

But here's the good news, my friends... finally! Even if we reject this Prince of Peace, this Exorcist of demons, he still accepts us. Even if we curse him, somehow he still loves us. Even if we run from him and call him Beelzebub, and get lost somewhere in the reeds, he still looks for us as the Good Shepherd. And even if we say we don't need him, somehow he is Emmanuel, and remains ever with us.

For in the end, he is our Savior. And perhaps the perfect father-figure. And he was sent from his own Father to live among us so to know us and even suffer with us. Little old us. He went into the wilderness in front us, he went to the cross instead of us, and he rose to life for all of us, all out of love for us.

So on this Sunday then, on this Father's Day where we celebrate good role-modeling and sacrificial love -- and on this Juneteenth where we witness to the power of liberation -- will we follow Christ's lead? Will we try to exorcise our demons and free ourselves from these chains? And will we accept help in doing so, and offer it to others?

Or will we will act like we don't need it and keep the status-quo? Refusing to get rid of all the junk that holds us back from a better, more wholesome, and just life for all?

Friends, the choice is ours. Just as it's always been.

Thanks be to God for our free-will.

Amen.