

EXORCIZING OUR DEMONS

Mark 5: 1-20

What does it feel like living in a society where you are afraid all the time? It's something hard for most of us here to relate to. But some of us have come from places in the world where we've been afraid. This is why many seek refuge in countries like Canada. When your freedom to be, your well-being and safety, your health and the health of your family, your economic future and so much else is highly limited if not threatened altogether, you need to find a way to leave. Imagine if on top of all this you have also been the victim of violence and torture or have witnessed violence and death? How do you find your way beyond that?

Let me offer a story to begin with. About 25 years ago now, Anatoly Krasovsky, a businessman in Belarus, disappeared. His wife Irina couldn't understand what had happened. Anatoly had been in Minsk with a politician friend. When Irina hadn't heard from him late into the night, she called his cellphone. There was no answer. The next day there was no word either. Irina began to panic. She called police stations and checked local hospitals. Nothing. Was Anatoly one more victim of many who had disappeared?

Weeks went by and then months... nothing. No one knew anything or they were afraid to talk. Irina was tiring those around her with her panicked inquiries. People wanted her to be quiet and not draw attention to herself. If this happened to Anatoly, it could happen to anyone else associated with him too. But Irina would not and could not give up. She was going to go insane if she just kept silent. But what could she do? President Lukashenko had seized power ruthlessly and he was going to hold on to it anyway he could. He was suspicious of everyone and any questioning of him was a threat to be silenced. Thus many, like Anatoly, had disappeared.

So, what to do? How would Irina cope? What recourse did she have? Was she simply to repress her anger and grief until, like many, she got sick or depressed or suicidal? Was she to simply give in to her fear to protect her daughters and family? But wouldn't such suppression drive her mad?

While many of us here are far removed from anything Irina was suffering, Irina's story may help us understand a little better what is happening in our gospel reading. We often read of strange manifestations of illness and mental illness in gospel stories. The way they are described, there are dark forces at play, demons and behind the demons there is Satan. Satan stands against God. It's about evil against good, sickness against health, and demon possession against wholeness.

While the language may seem strange, the situation may be quite familiar in many contexts in our world if we're able to translate the language into more modern ways of describing trauma. Traumatic experiences of violence and feelings of deep and prolonged terror can lead to mental and physical manifestations of illness. And in the ancient world, such illness was often described as a kind of invasion of sinister forces that took over mind and body. Until these forces were somehow expelled or

exorcised, the mind and body could not heal and be whole. Jesus, as the embodiment of the power of divine love is a threat to these sinister forces. But how do these forces afflict people in the first place?

Let's dive into our scripture reading in search of revelatory wisdom. Our reading is one of the strangest accounts in the gospels, and honestly, scholars have been all over the place on how to interpret it. First of all, unlike many exorcism stories in the gospels, the demons possessing the man talk to Jesus. They provide some fascinating information. But how to interpret the information? And then, after the man is healed of his mental illness and is at peace, full of gratitude, the people of the town react in a totally unexpected way. Instead of rejoicing with the man, they're afraid. They beg Jesus to leave. What are they afraid of?

Traditional biblical scholarship has been stumped. But this is where understanding the politics of empire and how the violent colonizing of a people can cause all kinds of physical and mental distress, may illuminate us. Let's begin with how Jesus the healer engages the illness. Even though it is the man talking to Jesus, Jesus sees in the man a demon. There is something profound here. The illness is identified as a sinister foreign entity in the man. The healing must involve an exorcism – meaning a removal of the entity from the man.

And isn't this a fascinating way of thinking about illness – be it cancer, an addiction, a profound anxiety, an obsession, an anger, a hate, a bitterness, a depression or a fear that torments you and won't leave you alone? The man is clearly afflicted as he lives among the tombs of the dead. He screams and howls much of the time and does violence to himself or anyone who comes near him. The man is not only broken, he's in terror and he is trapped in himself. He has no way out other than harm to himself and everyone else. What trauma has possessed him so?

Jesus demands the demon leave the man, but the demon talks back. Jesus asks the demon its name so he can more directly engage it, and here is what he's told: "my name is Legion; for we are many." OK, when I was younger, I was taught that Legion is just another name for many demons. Many demons means the man was really tormented and really ill. Jesus had a real job on his hands... But more recent "post-colonial" readings of this story recognize that in that world "legion" is a military term meaning a whole unit of Roman soldiers. The terror of every subjugated people of the Roman empire was the Roman legions. A legion was composed of 6000 hardened soldiers, and when a legion was called to come to your town, you knew it was going to be horrific.

What had the people of this region done to have called down a Roman legion? One of the big issues at that time were taxes. The Romans extracted them to feed their massive military machine, the opulent wealth of those in power and lavish building projects. And the local political authorities did the dirty work, taking a large cut for themselves. People were desperate, hungry and on the edge. The only way to keep them giving what they didn't have was brutal violence. If you didn't have it, your children were taken away, your women were violated and whole villages were burned. People were slaughtered in front of you and there were crosses everywhere. Can you imagine the effects on mind and body such prolonged fear and terror must have had on people? Can you imagine the collective grief and hopelessness combined with a rage that had no where to go? Think about places in the world where

there are violent protests and government forces start beating, shooting and imprisoning people. What we don't see is what secret police then do. They go door to door, house to house and attack all your family members and more. Whatever it takes to terrorize and crush you into submission.

And so, this man, or the demon in the man, is revealing to Jesus that the terror he is somatising in his mind and body, and the reason he's living among the tombs is most likely the kind of grief, rage and despair that has no where to go but destroy the man and anyone who comes near him. Doesn't this make so much more sense of not only this, but so many of our gospel stories of rampant demonic possession manifesting in bazaar expressions of mental and physical illness?

So how does Jesus heal the man? The kind of healing Jesus does may be called a visualization. Rather than remove the demons forcefully, Jesus allows them to choose their own exit. To heal from violence you cannot commit violence in response. By physically going into a heard of swine who then, in a fit of madness it seems, rush down a steep bank into a lake and drown, the legion is visually destroyed in a kind of suicidal self-destruction.

Visualization is a powerful psychological and spiritual technique used very much today as much as it was used by Jesus. Yes, in biblical stories there is always a physical component. Actual demons that are entities are visualized exiting the man and then entering actual swine, who then in a fit of madness rush into the lake and drown. Do we take all this literally, even if there are swine that behave like they're mad? Or do we also see in this story some deeper meaning, namely, that this man like these townsfolk, needed some way of exorcising the demon of legion by which they had all been afflicted and possessed.

But while the townsfolk were living in terror, trying to go on with their lives, trying to pretend everything was normal and never talking about what had happened, the man in our story could not suppress it all. Who knows what loss and grief he was carrying. We don't know what had happened to him to cause him to somatise the trauma as he did, but violence towards others and self-harm, and certainly living among the tombs of the dead, speaks volumes beyond any words could ever express as to what loss and pain he had experienced.

So what's the message here? Not only for the man healed, but also for us here today, many of whom, thankfully, will never experience such terror and madness? What message can we squeeze out of this story?

First, we're all vulnerable to being traumatized. In the face of terrible happenings in our lives, our mental health and our physical health can become deeply affected and manifest symptoms and conditions quite extreme. A lot of understanding and compassion is needed, not judgement. We can be strong, but none of us is invincible.

Second, what does Jesus the healer offer a man and a community caught in a larger oppressive colonial system with multi-generational trauma? The people of the community were definitely afraid of Jesus. Was he going to awaken people like Moses had done centuries earlier, to rise up for freedom, which would then get the attention of the rulers, who would then send legions to terrorize them again? What

Jesus was offering in this situation was a lot of courageous mercy and love. He was not afraid of the man or his situation. He could come to him, engage his demons directly and compassionately, and find a way to exorcize them. Jesus could do what the townsfolk could not, for they were possessed by fear and grief. Jesus was the embodiment of infinite love.

Only compassion and care for one another can ultimately destroy the demons of violence, hate, despair and the trauma they cause. Yes, we need to pursue justice and reparation for true healing. But if you are in a regime where those in power are only interesting in holding on to power and will do anything to hold on to it, there is no room for the healing of reconciliation. Sometimes we have to find resiliency in caring for ourselves and for one another and to trust a greater love and justice are on our side. Violence is a dangerous thing and the energy for resistance can easily turn into retaliation, hate and destruction. It's a fine line. Jesus knows what people have suffered and what they may suffer again. His revolution in this context is a transformation of healing from within, through the power of a love that is courageous enough to engage the trauma openly and directly.

The man is ready for this. His demons are exorcized. He finds some peace in himself. He awakens to love. He is full of gratitude and praise to Jesus. He wants to follow him. Jesus tells him to stay where he is and spread the word. The people in the town are still possessed by the demons of terror, fear and grief. They don't welcome Jesus and what he has to offer. Until people are ready, they cannot heal. We have to be patient and non-judgemental, offering a hand of compassion, recognizing our mutual vulnerability. Jesus can only heal where people are open to be healed. The man was ready. The rest of the townsfolk were not... What about you and me? Where do we need to be freed from fear? What demons lurk within us, terrorizing us in subtle if not more overt ways? Are we ready to release those demons, to have them exorcized?...

Irina Krasovsky has still not found out what happened to her husband Anatoly, and she still has not found any justice. She no longer lives in Belarus, and despite the fear of most people in her country, Irina has become an activist against President Lukashenko and his murderous regime. She still carries a lot of anger and grief, but she's also on a journey of healing, finding a way to release the demons in her which had no where to go before. She has started an organization for all those families of the disappeared. She will not give up or give in. And in the meantime, she's spreading the word, she's found love in her life again and she's healing.

What about you and me? Where and how do we need to heal? It may not be as terrible a trauma as the man in our gospel story or that of Irina. Yet trauma is trauma and we all have them in our lives. We need the love and mercy of God to go deep into us, to help us visualize the demons exiting our heart, our spirit and our body; and we need to find our peace. With the power of the divine Spirit, healing is possible. New life is possible. Do you believe? Amen.