

Dispelling the Demons in our Lives

The Rev. Debbie Cook, Grace Church

Pentecost 4, Proper 7, Year C, RCL

June 24, 2007

One of the most popular writings of the fourth century, believe it or not, was entitled “The Life of Antony”. Written by Athanasius (one of those early church big-wigs), it detailed the life of Antony, an Egyptian monk, who lived a harsh and largely solitary life in the desert. He led a rigorous life of fasting and prayer, even choosing to forgo bodily pleasures such as regular sleep and bathing. But Antony’s big claim to fame was his encounters with and knowledge of demons. He wrestled with demons, suffered because of demons, and became an expert on demons, even giving advice to others on how to distinguish a demon from an angel, and how to defeat demons through the sign of the cross and faithful prayer. In time, he became sought after as one who could cast demons out of others. He maintained that he had no power over the demons on his own, but accomplished everything through his faith in Christ.

Today’s gospel story illustrates Jesus’ power over demons. Journeying across the Sea of Galilee, he and his disciples land in Gentile territory. They are greeted there not by a welcoming, expectant crowd but by a naked, tortured man. Alone, he dwelled among the tombs, making his home among the dead rather than the living. All attempts to bind him to his community had failed. He had become an odd fixture, a caricature of a human being, not even having a name to share when Jesus asked it of him. The demons that he was tormented by not only ruled his actions but had also stripped him of his identity, replacing his name with theirs.

Yet for all the demons’ desire to avoid Jesus, here they were, face to face with the one alone who could end their reign of terror. Such was the tenacity, the longing in this man—for even though he appeared to be wholly consumed by that which was evil, a spark remained. The image of God in which he was made could not be extinguished, even by a legion of demons, and

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it may have been that recognition of the creator by the created that brought this man to Jesus' presence. Demons or no, he would not be denied this one chance to be made whole, made free.

Demons never go quietly in the Gospels—often they speak to Jesus, or try to (before he silences them); or they shriek loudly when they are being cast out. Here they try something new—they bargain. Like a convicted person pleading for a lesser sentence, they beg for and receive a new home in herd of pigs rather than being returned to the abyss from which they came. Very quickly this legion of demons realizes its mistake, for the pigs turn and run, drowning themselves in the waters of the lake. Truth be told, it must have been quite a sight—sort of like a stampede of buffalo over the western plains, or to put it in more modern terms—a crowd of shoppers rushing into a Wal-Mart on Black Friday morning. (Christmas shopping—uniquely designed to bring out the demons in all of us). But instead of running off with a great deal on I-pods, the demons wind up with a first class ticket back to the abyss, for without a live host in which to live, it appears they are doomed. In contrast, the man is healed and free—his identity, his humanity is restored by the One who calls us by name.

You may think that this would be an occasion for rejoicing, and for the healed man, it is. It may come as no surprise, however, that the swineherds were unhappy with this turn of events—after all, they were now out of a job! For their part, they were simply minding their own business when this guy and his friends show up in the boat, exchange a few words with that naked, possessed man, and then boom! all the pigs went crazy and ran off into the lake and drowned. I don't blame them for running off—they were probably seeking witnesses to make sure that they hadn't lost it either. Obviously, their story was compelling enough to draw persons out to the shoreline (like rubberneckers on a highway), and lo and behold, all they said

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was true: the pigs were gone, and the formerly possessed man, who was once so wild that no chains could hold him, sat calmly by this stranger, clothed and sounding perfectly normal. But the people, instead of embracing the man and Jesus, reacted with fear. After all, who was this stranger, who could cast out a legion of demons with just a word? What did he want? Such a man must be powerful indeed—and hey, what if he decided he didn't like their ways and used that power on them? Would they all run off and want to drown themselves too? They had never seen a power quite like this—but they had seen power gained and wielded in the world around them. Such use of power never came to a good end—so as far as they were concerned, this kind of power around they didn't need. They decided it was better just to convince this man and his friends to leave—for we don't need people like you coming around and turning our lives upside down, thank you very much. Much to their relief (and the healed man's sadness), Jesus and the disciples agreed to leave. You could almost hear the collective sigh of relief from the Gerasene people. Jesus was gone, and thankfully the demons were too.

Or were they?

Now it is true that we don't hear too much about demons today, outside of our books, movies and other fiction based material. And let's face it, how many patients in a hospital have 'demonic possession' listed on the medical charts? But if we are honest with ourselves, we need to admit that demons still do exist in the here and now—binding us, isolating us, diminishing us. They can rob us of our full humanity, distort our identity. The names may have changed, but the effect remains the same.

One demon that may readily come to mind is the one of addiction. Alcohol, drugs, gambling—it matters not; the object of our desire becomes an obsession, ruling over us and

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insidiously directing all aspects of our lives. We lose control of ourselves to that which seeks to consume us, bind us, and eventually isolates us from those we love and who love us. Just like the demoniac of this gospel story had lost his identity to a legion of demons, so too can the addict—becoming ‘the town drunk’, the ‘druggie’, a face without a name, known only by their addiction.

But addiction is not the only demon we deal with in our lives today. There is fear, which seeks to limit us; shame, which isolates us; and greed and the abuse of power that distorts the focus of our worship to the things of this world rather than God—all these and more can affect and potentially rule our lives. The demons we struggle with today, as always, can cloud our minds and hearts so that they can keep us from being the loving, open human beings we are called to be as children of God. They call us to turn inward, separating us from others as well as our own selves, drawing us away from the community in which we are called to live as members of the Body of Christ.

For it is in Christ that we find our strength against those demons that long to have power over our lives. Just as the man of our gospel story sought out Jesus on that shoreline so long ago, so too do we need to seek out our Savior when darkness closes in and threatens to overwhelm us. The One who loves us beyond all measure knows our struggles and offers himself willingly and completely so that we may be made free. Never are we alone, for no matter how cut off we feel, our Lord will come to meet us, to welcome us, to be with us. We may forget who we are, but the One who calls us by name never does—for as we are uniquely created, we are also uniquely named, uniquely loved. No one can take your place in God’s heart. God’s desire for us to be restored to the fullness of our humanity, in relationship with God and with each other, is

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absolute; and our Lord will face and defeat all the demons that the world can muster in order to see that happen.

The man of our gospel story today came to experience all this in a dramatic and unexpected way. Made free, restored and renewed, he sought to follow Jesus in a very direct way. Instead, he was commissioned to become the first apostle to the Gentiles, beating Paul by a number of years—for Jesus sent him to share the Good News of God in Christ among the very people who fearfully asked Jesus to leave. As members of the Body of Christ, we too are asked to go and be witnesses to God's transforming love, and to bring others to know our Lord, helping to dispel the demons that plague so many lives.

St. Antony knew this on a very vivid level. His detailed battles with the demons that sought his destruction may sound strange—and perhaps, even unbalanced—to our modern-day ears, but they are not without value, for in his struggles we can recognize our own. His advice to trust in Christ and the power of the cross is as timely today as it was in 4th century Egypt. And just as Antony used the lessons of his battles to fortify others, we too are asked to reach out and lend the light of our love to those trapped in darkness.

Go, and declare all that God has done for you—in the name and through the power of Jesus.

Amen.