

Signs and Wonders

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From the Pulpit of
Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church

June 22, 2025

Galatians 3:23-29

²³ Now before faith came, we were imprisoned and guarded under the law until faith would be revealed. ²⁴ Therefore the law was our disciplinarian until Christ came, so that we might be reckoned as righteous by faith. ²⁵ But now that faith has come, we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian, ²⁶ for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. ²⁷ As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. ²⁸ 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. ²⁹ And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise.

Luke 8:26-39

²⁶ Then they arrived at the region of the Gerasenes, which is opposite Galilee. ²⁷ As he stepped out on shore, a man from the city who had demons met him. For a long time he had not worn any clothes, and he did

not live in a house but in the tombs. ²⁸ When he saw Jesus, he cried out and fell down before him, shouting, “What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I beg you, do not torment me,” ²⁹ for Jesus had commanded the unclean spirit to come out of the man. (For many times it had seized him; he was kept under guard and bound with chains and shackles, but he would break the bonds and be driven by the demon into the wilds.) ³⁰ Jesus then asked him, “What is your name?” He said, “Legion,” for many demons had entered him. ³¹ They begged him not to order them to go back into the abyss.

³² Now there on the hillside a large herd of swine was feeding, and the demons begged Jesus to let them enter these. So he gave them permission. ³³ Then the demons came out of the man and entered the swine, and the herd stampeded down the steep bank into the lake and was drowned.

³⁴ When the swineherds saw what had happened, they ran off and told it in the city and in the country. ³⁵ Then people came out to see what had happened, and when they came to Jesus, they found the man from whom the demons had gone sitting at the feet of Jesus, clothed and in his right mind. And they became frightened. ³⁶ Those who had seen it told them how the one who had been possessed by demons had been healed. ³⁷ Then the whole throng of people of the surrounding region of the Gerasenes asked Jesus to leave them, for they were seized with great fear. So he got into the boat and returned. ³⁸ The man from whom the demons had gone out begged that he might be with him, but Jesus sent him away, saying, ³⁹ “Return to your home, and declare how much God has done for you.” So he went away, proclaiming throughout the city how much Jesus had done for him.

One of the unexpected joys of the two years our family spent as mission co-workers in Egypt, before coming here to Bryn Mawr 10 years ago, was a friendship I made with an anthropologist who was also a neighbor in our missionary apartment building. Specifically, her area of research is anthropology of religion with a focus on the Coptic Orthodox Church, which is the religious identity of the overwhelming majority of Christians in Egypt.

What I loved about being her friend was that she would allow me to tag along as she visited different religious sites and met with church leaders around Cairo. It was very impressive to watch her work as she gracefully and with a generous curiosity interviewed her subjects.

So, the night she knocked on our apartment door to ask if I was interested in going with her to an exorcism, I jumped at the chance. Exorcisms for demon possession are still practiced in the Coptic Church, where signs and wonders such as these remain a part of the religious life of the Egyptian Christian community. A well-known priest, renowned for his ability to perform the act as well as other miraculous healings, was in the city, and an evening service was scheduled at one of the downtown churches.

Normally, the plan is to be as anonymous as possible and to fly under the radar, but two foreign women trying to get through security at such a big event drew a little too much attention. So, to my friend's frustration, we were escorted into the service and seated right at the front of the sanctuary where everyone could see us, and in turn, where we could see everything that was happening.

I had no idea what to expect.

We were told that the first exorcism of the night would be for a young man troubled by a spirit, and that the priest would be praying over him. It seemed like it took a lot of other men to bring him in, and he did seem in distress. And then prayers were said, I think I remember the priest touching him. But it all happened very quickly. And then they led the man back out right past us, and I will never forget what happened then. He looked at the congregation, and in my memory, it feels like he was looking right at me. He just shrugged his shoulders and walked out.

It was a delightfully unexpected moment for me. I had come to the service that night hoping for something spectacular and over the top, something shocking or even miracle adjacent. Maybe something slightly biblical. But in fact, it was incredibly normal, incredibly human.

After the exorcism, things also unexpectedly wrapped up very quickly, and so we made our way through the sanctuary towards the priest, whom you talk to, to see if you can talk to the other priest, and we were told that he had left, and my friend tried to make arrangements to meet him another time. Next to us was an elderly woman also asking to see the priest. We stood and listened to her plea - she had traveled from very far away to ask for prayers for her son, who was very sick, couldn't the priest come out and pray with her in hopes of healing her son. Again, I was keeping my eye out for the exotic, and here we were, encountering perhaps the most essential and universal human experience: a mother advocating for her child.

We don't often read and preach on stories like the one we just heard this morning from Luke's Gospel - stories of demon possessions and

exorcisms - they are a little too strange, too foreign, too much in conflict with our modern sensibilities to seem like they have much relevance in our life of faith today.

But if we look at stories like this through the lens of that same kind of generous curiosity that my anthropologist friend taught me, it turns out that we often can find that even the strangest pieces of scripture still speak to our lives today. The text may carry echoes of an ancient world with customs, rituals, or judgments that feel miles away from our lived experience of faith. And yet, if we approach these stories not with quick judgment, but with the posture of a spiritual anthropologist, something surprising can happen. We begin to listen—not to explain things away, but to understand them more deeply, and maybe understand ourselves.

Jesus himself serves as a stranger in a strange land, as he and the disciples have crossed the sea of Galilee to the eastern shore of the lake - which the first hearers of this miracle story would have recognized immediately as a Gentile rather than Jewish region, even if it hadn't included a herd of pigs, which would have been anathema in a Jewish community.

Jesus is immediately approached by a man who is suffering, we learn, not just from one demon but a multitude, while at the same time suffering from the ostracization of his community, who have bound him in shackles amongst the community graves.

The story mostly takes on the standard formula for all exorcism in the New Testament - Jesus and the Demon encounter one another, the demon senses the power that Jesus contains, Jesus verbally casts out the demon,

there are signs that the person has healed or recovered from the possession, and then the witnesses respond in awe.

It's unclear why this story has so many subtle differences aside from that formula. Maybe, scholars surmise, it is because the Gospel writers want us to understand that even in this different place, this Gentile place, with different circumstances and culture, with different people, even then the power of God through Jesus Christ is still a force for transformation and liberation. And so, the story itself is just a little different.

For example, while in other places in the Gospels there is the implication that a person might be possessed by more than one demon at a time, this is the only story that includes so many of them. A character like Mary Magdalene was said to have been liberated from seven spirits, but this tortured man is possessed by a legion of spirits, which the first-century hearers would have immediately understood to be closer to 5,000 demons, the size of a Roman military legion of infantrymen.

Of course, the inclusion of this herd of pigs is what most of us consider the strangest and difficult to understand aspect of this exorcism, likely for its first hearers as well. In their debate with Jesus, this legion of spirits themselves suggests that instead of Jesus banishing them to the abyss, they enter into these pigs, and yet that plan doesn't work out for them at all, as the pigs drown themselves in the very lake that Jesus has just crossed.

But it is the response of the witnesses in this community that is most distinct in Luke's telling. Whereas the community normally responds with awe to the power displayed through Jesus' signs and wonders, this community responds in fear. It is the sight of the man seated, clothed, and

in his right mind that triggers their horror, rather than all of the grim and alarming details of his previous existence, mostly by their own hand.

And they become so afraid that they asked Jesus to leave.

The most powerful part of the whole event is the one completely outside of the standard formula for an exorcism - it is the very end where the man pleads with Jesus to take him with them. I will admit to being frustrated with Jesus' response, just like I was frustrated with that priest who left so quickly that night in Cairo he couldn't pray with that distraught mother. Because if it were me, I would have said, of course, this has not been a great place for you, and I wouldn't want to stay either. But instead, Jesus places a new responsibility upon him. No longer the possessed man who lives among the graves or in the wilds, he is now an evangelist for the good news of God through Jesus Christ.

So, if we approach this passage with the sensibilities of an anthropologist, with a generous curiosity, what does that mean for how this strange and foreign story might guide us today?

First, we honor the sacred, even when it feels unfamiliar. Just because something isn't part of our tradition or feels uncomfortable doesn't mean it isn't holy.

I would guess that any exorcism story in scripture, not just this particularly unusual one, feels outside our experiences and understanding of what is sacred, and is likely not how we think about God acting in the world today.

But we can still believe that this was a real religious experience in that time and for some Christian communities today. We don't need to explain it away by saying that this was a first-century way to understand mental illness, or even wonder if the story was simply fabricated to display the power of Jesus.

While we may describe it differently, while it may manifest differently, while we may have different experiences of it even among ourselves, we all can admit that there is still a measure of evil in our world. Many days, I wish evil were as easily cast out as these 5000 demons were. Maybe this story is a lesson to us that we are too reliant on our own powers and not the power of God in the fight against evil.

Second, we seek to understand from within. Don't stand above the text, step inside it. Ask what this meant to people then? How does it still speak to people today? A posture of humility can open us to deeper understanding of ourselves.

We might easily judge these Gentiles who failed to recognize the good and the safety, the power and the transformation that Jesus brought to their community. We can accuse them of being more comfortable with the pain and the torment that they knew than a power they didn't. Preacher Fred Craddock points out that "This particularly successful balance of tolerance and management of the demonic among them also allowed the people to keep attention off their own lives." he goes on, "But now the power of God for good comes to their community and it disturbs the way of life they had come to accept. Even when it is for good, power that can neither be calculated nor managed is frightening." But if we judge them, we need to bring our own humility to this text and recognize that we and our modern world do the same thing all the time.

We want change, but just not for us. We want other's lives to improve as long as there is little cost. We want to see, and name, and transform the things that are broken, but not when they shine too brightly on the privileges we may have benefited from ourselves.

Finally, we reflect on where we're coming from. We all approach Scripture with assumptions shaped by our lives. That's not a flaw—it's human. We don't have to ignore our stories and experiences, but we do need to hold them loosely and be open to other people's experiences.

We can painfully recognize that this man's story, his unhealth, his marginalization, and his torment represent too many people in that time and in our own. In his request to Jesus to allow him to stay with him, to travel with him, we can hear a person who has suffered asking for safety and community. That's what we heard that night from that Egyptian mother seeking help.

So even if we may have never been on our knees asking for help, we can see the humanity in another person's experience and respond in love.

Sometimes we read and study scripture because there are pieces of wisdom that we need to integrate into our hearts and minds, because there are laws of compassion and justice that we need to apply to our daily decisions and our life altering decisions, because we can look to our ancestors in the faith and learn from their mistakes and their faithfulness, but sometimes we read and study scripture because it helps us practice this kind of understanding across differences. Differences in time, in culture, and in experience. We practice this with humility, because then when we go out into the world, when we cross over into a place that is new or strange, with people who different than us - whether across the globe, our

city, or even a backyard barbeque, we have already practiced some of these same skills my friend taught me.

While the world in this moment seems to be a little short on humility and understanding, diving into scripture and ancient texts reminds us that as people, this is a multi-generation spanning struggle and task set before us.

Just as Jesus gave this healed man a responsibility in his redeemed life, so too are we tasked with a weighty responsibility to be evangelists for the love and compassion of Jesus Christ - to seek to understand when others experiences are not our own, to believe that something that sacred to us might not be sacred to another, and vice versa, to not stand over but with humility to walk alongside someone else's life. And to trust that the power of God will offer us our own, maybe less spectacular and miraculous signs and wonders, to be able to glimpse the possibility of transformation in the world.

Amen.