

ST. JOHN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH
COMPASS, PA

June 19, 2022 – PENTECOST 2/PROPER 7, YR. C

The Rev. Dr. Nina George-Hacker

Sermon: “*One Little Word Shall Fell Him*”

Isaiah 65:1-9 (The Lord is angry with His people for their disobedience)
Psalm 22:18-27 (A plea for God's salvation, and praise for His sovereignty)
Galatians 3:23-29 (Before Christ, we were under the law; now, we live by faith)
St. Luke 8:26-39 (Jesus delivers a man from many demons)

Evil is real. Not Hollywood's evil with its vampires, witches, werewolves, and demented slashers, but the kind that draws true horror to our faces and freezes our hearts in fear—abominations so repulsive, we can barely take them in. If evil were merely the stuff of horror films and superstitions, we might go about our lives relatively unperturbed, waving off such things as the products of warped imaginations. But we know better. Don't we?¹

Behind many myths there lies a grain of truth. For example, Bram Stoker's 19th century gothic tale of a vampire may have come from an awareness of a strange blood disorder called porphyria, which causes sensitivity to sunlight; receding gums that expose the teeth making them look like fangs; and loss of red blood cells, for which doctors sometimes recommended the patient drink blood. Such sufferers also avoided mirrors because the disease disfigures the face, and were averse to garlic, because its sulfur content makes porphyria worse.²

Before the modern era, trained physicians were few and far between. Thus, many communities depended on local folk-healers often known as wise women or men. Their knowledge of herbal healing was gleaned through exploring fields and forests, and was passed down through the generations. Because so many were illiterate, they came up with rhymes and songs to remember their concoctions, which may have inspired the witches' spells found in literature, such as the incantation by Shakespeare's three “weird sisters” in his drama, “MacBeth.” If anything went wrong with the herbal healers' treatments, they ran the risk of being accused of witchcraft.³

While these manifestations of so-called “evil” result from misunderstood medical history, true evil is much more surreptitious and invasive, and it often takes us entirely by surprise. As Christians, we believe that evil is the work of the devil and his fallen angels, who became evil spirits, and of humans that fall under their influence. We see true evil in the senseless mistreatment and murder of innocent children and animals, and in the extermination of entire ethnic, racial, or religious groups. We recognize it in the cold eyes of serial killers and violent psychopaths. We witness it working through political and economic systems that persecute the poor and the powerless. Overwhelmingly, the acts that chill us to the bone are those entirely devoid of empathy, compassion, human connection, or conscience.

As a true-life example, just this past week, Pat Owens emailed me with a prayer request for her neighbors—a divorced woman and her daughter. When they were out to dinner one evening, the woman's “ex” broke in and turned on the gas. To ignite a conflagration, he then set fire to a nearby wooden cabinet. The entire house was lost, and the women's six cats were burned alive.

True evil exists both in opposition to, and absence from, God. Evil is surreptitious. It threatens all of God's creation, and defies God by being sneaky and preying on the helpless. Just look at the poor man in today's Gospel story. For years he haunted the tombs. A living person dwelling in the place of the dead. *He* might as well be dead. No one remembers his name; they barely register that he's a human being. “Crazy” they call him. Reduced to an ailment and haunted by demons.

So, he wanders the tombs, naked, alone, neglected, ashamed, forgotten, afraid. Never knowing peace, never knowing human decency, never knowing love. Miserable, he is entombed and tied down by his demons, by societal neglect and indifference, dead to any sense of authentic living.⁴

Evil threatens God's creation and everyone in it. And yet, it is subordinate to God. We see this in the opening of the Book of Job, and we see it in today's Scripture, as Jesus shows us in no uncertain terms that no matter how perverse, damaging, insidious, and insistent evil may be, it cannot stand up to the power of God, and is subject to His authority alone.

In the events related for us by St. Luke, we see Jesus sailing across the Galilean Lake to the land of the Gerasenes, a non-Jewish, gentile territory. As soon as He emerges from the boat, He is met by a man possessed by demons. And yet, when this filthy, crazed, naked man encounters Christ, immediately he—or is it his demons?—identifies Jesus as the “Son of the Most High God.” Now remember, Jesus is in a Gentile territory, and this man is not Jewish.

When Jesus asks the man's name (treating him like a regular person) he answers—or is it his demons?—“Legion.” Luke's readers would likely have known that a Roman Legion consisted of approximately 5,000 infantry and 300 cavalry. In other words, this wretched shell of a man was being endlessly tormented by a LOT of evil spirits—and had probably lost his mind, too, in the process.

When Jesus commands the demons to leave the man, they shriek and beg Jesus not to torture them. Their immediate reaction is fear and submission. As the demons converse with Jesus, He (who is God!) gives them “permission” to enter a herd of pigs, which then rush off a cliff and drown in the lake.

The swineherds race to the village to gossip about what had happened, and as people gathered, they found the formerly possessed (and likely insane) man calm, dressed, and in his right mind. The demons had left him. Shouldn't those who witnessed this miracle be jumping for joy? But no. They were angry and afraid.

Why? Well, first of all, in this Gentile territory, pigs were prized for food and Jesus had just destroyed the locals' economy. Beyond that, Jesus' power to deliver and heal the demoniac so dramatically absolutely terrified them. They asked Him to leave at once! Interesting. It was easier for them to tolerate evil and allow it to live among their tombs and within their fellow villager than it was for them to welcome Jesus and the immense power of God to bring about new life among them.

They insist that Jesus go away because when you raise the dead in the middle of a cemetery, fear has a way of creeping in. Jesus goes back to the boat and prepares to leave.

But the former demoniac begs and pleads to go with Him. He wants to be a disciple, to know better this Most High God who recognized his worth and dignity, even when his own people would not. But Jesus asks him to remain, to tell the story of his healing, to spread the good news among the people who only knew him as the man who ran naked and crazed among the tombs. He is a *living parable* of the power of God to transform even the most broken and neglected into beacons of hope. And hope can be scary.⁵

Healing and wholeness, redemption and resurrections are frightening, because they mean a different way of life, a new order, a new reality, a new creation has arrived. And in shying away from divine transformation, we, too, find ways to cling to the familiar tombs we have long haunted.

To some extent, all of us cower before the presence and power of God. Like the Gerasenes, we also tend to fear what we don't understand. They could not comprehend this man who clearly wielded the power of God to vanquish evil and to heal that which is utterly broken. Moreover, they knew Jesus was Jewish, a foreigner. All of this was so outside their comfort zone, they wanted nothing to do with it—or Him. So, by instructing the now-healed man to stay there and tell everyone what God had done for him, Jesus came up with some clever evangelism. After all, we, too, tend to hear truth more easily from those who are known to us.

In our time, we may not identify evil in the same ways as people did in Jesus' day. But we do *see* and *experience* it. Sometimes, it seems to come out of nowhere, resulting in heart-breaking destruction and loss—like the arson that leveled Pat's neighbors' home and killed their cats. Sometimes, it seems hard to find the root of it, but its results are undeniable.

Perhaps because it is so tricky, secretive, and insidious, we tend to think evil and the devil are not real. In our age of science, medicine, psychology, and reason, we tend to negate the idea of a spiritual evil. We find it easier to blame political or societal ills. That is, until we witness or experience the addiction and abuse, the mayhem and murder all around us. Just think about what happened on May 24th in Uvalde, Texas.

However, it is to our detriment that we underestimate evil. Jesus encountered it and the devil repeatedly. So, from the evidence of Scripture alone, we must take it seriously. The good news is, where Jesus is strong, evil is weakened. Where God is present, active, and protective, evil is stopped in its tracks. We tend to fear evil. But evil fears good. And in a true community of Christian love, evil can plant no roots. The best remedy against evil is always the presence and power of Jesus Christ, whom we encounter in prayer, in praise, in worship, in God's Word, and in the Sacraments. In fact, we pray against evil whenever we say the Lord's Prayer that Jesus taught us.

When we—or someone we love—experience the joy of being healed and made whole, like the man in today's story Jesus calls us to share with others what God *is* doing and *has* done for us. Go forth and tell how much God has done for you!

And if you're still wrestling with your own demons, whatever they may be, Jesus can free you from them. All you have to do is ask! Always remember:

*"A mighty fortress is our God, a bulwark never failing; our helper he amid the flood of mortal ills prevailing; for still our ancient foe doth seek to work us woe; his craft and power are great and, armed with cruel hate, on earth is not his equal. And though this world with devils filled should threaten to undo us; we will not fear, for God hath willed his truth to triumph through us; the prince of darkness grim, we tremble not for him; his rage we can endure, for lo! his doom is sure, one little word shall fell him."*⁶

That word is *JESUS*. Amen!

¹ Adapt. Lori Wagner, "The Thing About Evil," n.d., [Sermons.com](https://www.sermons.com/sermon/the-thing-about-evil/2237407) <https://www.sermons.com/sermon/the-thing-about-evil/2237407> 14 June 2022. Used with permission.

² Adapt. Michael Hefferon, "Vampire Myths Originated With a Real Blood Disorder," [The Conversation](https://theconversation.com/vampire-myths-originated-with-a-real-blood-disorder-140830), 23 June 2020 <https://theconversation.com/vampire-myths-originated-with-a-real-blood-disorder-140830> 14 June 2022.

³ Adapt. "Wise-Women & Cunning Folk: Doctors of the People," 13 May 2022, [UAB Libraries](https://guides.library.uab.edu/c.php?g=1048546&p=7609198) <https://guides.library.uab.edu/c.php?g=1048546&p=7609198> 14 June 2022.

⁴ Adapt. Deon Johnson, "The Tombs," 23 June 2019, [EpiscopalChurch.org](https://www.episcopalchurch.org/sermon/the-tombs-proper-7-c-2019/) <https://www.episcopalchurch.org/sermon/the-tombs-proper-7-c-2019/> 11 June 2022.

⁵ Johnson, *op. cit.*

⁶ Words from "A Mighty Fortress is our God," Hymn 688, [The Hymnal 1982](https://www.hymnary.org/hymn/1982) (New York, Church Publishing, 1985).