

Haydenville Congregational Church
The Rev. Dr. Andrea Ayvazian
June 20, 2010
Luke 8:26-39

“Go Away Jesus”

*May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts
be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord Our Strength and Our Redeemer. Amen.*

Today’s Gospel reading describes one of the strangest moments in the earthly ministry of Jesus. The story is the last in a series of four miracle stories that come in rapid succession in the Book of Luke. The passage for today tells of Jesus performing a miraculous exorcism. With great detail, Luke describes the healing of what is often called, “the Gerasene demoniac.”

Let’s review where this takes place and what is happening.

Much of Jesus’ life and ministry centered around the Sea of Galilee, specifically the western side of the Sea of Galilee (the “sea” is actually a large lake).

In this story in Luke, Jesus does an unusual thing: he crosses the Sea of Galilee to the far side, to the eastern shore. Jesus and his followers arrive in a new world—a strange and alien world, gentile territory, far from home. Jesus is around swine herders. THAT in itself is new and different—people in Jesus’ homeland (the other side of the Sea of Galilee) were all Jews and they would not and could not be found herding pigs—pigs were unclean, forbidden, and could not be touched.

In this story Jesus crosses the Sea of Galilee, and in this strange new world he encounters a man—it seems the encounter occurs the moment he steps off the boat—a troubled man who is possessed by evil spirits or demons. The man screams, he is naked, he seems deranged. The poor man is so alienated from society that he lives out among the tombs—and, we are told, the man has lived like this for a very long time.

In a dramatic fashion, Jesus commands the demons to come out of the man. But the deranged man does not welcome this intervention. The man screams, “What have you to do with me? ...I beg you, do not torment me.” Despite the possessed man’s protestations, the exorcism occurs, the unclean spirits come out of him and the man is healed.

But the cast-out demons need someone or something to inhabit and so Jesus has the demons enter the herd of swine. The swine then go crazy, rushing headlong to a cliff and throwing themselves into the Sea of Galilee where they drown.

The swine herders see everything that has happened and they simply run away. Word spreads about what has occurred and people from the city and countryside come rushing to the shore to see for themselves. The crowd that gathers finds the once-possessed man now in his right mind, clothed and sitting at the feet of Jesus.

It appears that the man is not only healed by Jesus, he becomes a student of Jesus' for "sitting at the feet of Jesus" is coded language for having Jesus as a teacher. The man who had the demons cast out may in fact be Jesus' first gentile student.

Then the story takes yet another interesting turn. Jesus tells the man, "Go home and tell what God has done for you." Go home, Jesus is saying, to those who had for so long turned you out, abandoned and reviled you. Go home to those who had put you in chains and shackles. Go home to those from whom your illness separated you. Go home and witness to what God has done for you in this healing. And the man does just that. He goes "proclaiming through the city" how much Jesus had done for him.

This dramatic, chaotic, perplexing story involves Jesus in an alien environment, a man filled with demons (so many that they are called "Legion"), an exorcism, the cast-out demons entering a herd of swine that leap off a cliff, and the once-possessed man restored to his right mind and commissioned to spread the word of God.

This is a dramatic, chaotic, perplexing story. Interesting characters, enormous commotion, exciting outcome. But what are we to make of all of this?

As I tried to make sense of this story and wondered how I could preach on this text, I remembered a device I learned in Divinity School...a device to use in preaching that I almost never rely on but I want to use today.

The device is called *find yourself in the story*.

There are lots of characters in today's story...lots of parts to choose from. And so I ask you: where are you in this story? Who do you relate to most?

Are you Jesus....trying to find your way and make a difference in a strange and alien land? Do you sometimes feel far from your home, in an unwelcoming environment? Do you sometimes wonder where are MY people?

Are you the man filled with demons....do you feel possessed by unclean spirits who sometimes seize ahold of you, demons that sometimes control your life?

Are you the swine...minding your own business and suddenly gripped by confusing, raging impulses that make you want to rush to the edge of a cliff and throw your body over?

Are you the swine herders...do you sometimes feel that you witness things that make you just want to run the other way?

Are you the townspeople who come to witness, find the once-possessed man in his right mind, grow fearful and ask Jesus to leave them alone?

Are you the healed man who Jesus commissions to go out and spread the word of God and talk about what God has done for you?

Who are YOU in this story? Are you one character? Are you several? Do you relate to any of them, to one, to all?

I don't know if you relate to any ONE character, or more than one. But I do know that no matter which character you relate to in the story, all the characters have one thing in common: they all tell Jesus to go away. No matter which character you choose, unless it is the healed man at the very end, you told Jesus to go away.

Jesus crosses the Sea of Galilee on a boat and steps out on land, on foreign soil. He is in a place where he is not very welcome.

“As he stepped out on land...” the Bible tells us (notice he has just arrived), Jesus meets a “...man of the city who had demons.” This man has been bound with chains and shackles, occasionally breaking away and hiding in tombs. Jesus has come to a foreign land, met a troubled man and chose to heal him. And yet the man prefers the anguish he knows to the healing Jesus offers.

“What have you to do with me?” the man screams, “I beg you, do not torment me.” Go away Jesus, he is saying essentially. Go away. I would rather remain in my tortured state than have you heal me.

Although rebuked, Jesus performs the exorcism, the demons leave the man and enter the swine that run to a cliff, throw themselves over and drown.

The swine herders, who observe the healing, do not recognize Jesus, do not gather round him, do not worship or even speak to him, they run away. Go away Jesus, they are saying essentially. Go away.

People in the city hear what happened and come to see this strange man and they find the man who they had always known as deranged now fine, clothed and sitting at Jesus' feet. And what is their response? The Bible says, "...all the people of the surrounding country asked Jesus to leave them for they were seized with great fear." Go away Jesus, they are saying, Go away.

Jesus complies, the Bible says, he does eventually leave in a boat to return to the other side of the Sea of Galilee. Only the man who was healed wants to stay with Jesus. Only he wants to get in the boat and be with Jesus. But Jesus sends HIM away with a commissioning: "Return to your home, and declare how much God has done for you."

No matter who YOU relate to in this story, it is clear that Jesus touched you. And you told Jesus to go away. Jesus touches each person in the story. And except for the man once-filled with demons, every character in the story tells Jesus to go away.

Jesus is told to go away but he never really does. He may eventually get back in the boat and again cross the Sea of Galilee but he has touched and changed the Gerasene people forever.

Jesus may be shunned and told to leave but his influence, his spirit, his effect, his imprint on people and on the world never leaves.

Jesus continues to touch and change lives even when he has gone away. Even when told to go away, he does not really ever leave. Even a brief encounter with Jesus makes an imprint and changes lives for good and forever.

Like the people on the far side of the Galilee, like the Gerasene people, we may tell Jesus to leave us alone. But he never goes far away. Jesus does not give up on us, not on any of us. Jesus does not give up on people.

We are stuck with him, thank God. Jesus continues to be present in our lives, even when we say “go away” he is there, ready to whisper our names in our ears, to offer comfort and counsel, love and support. Jesus does not ever leave us.

In this strange and dramatic story in the Book of Luke, the people get mad at Jesus, they are afraid of Jesus, they do not appreciate his gifts of healing, they do not recognize his spiritual powers, they do not want him around. But they are changed forever by his one brief encounter on their shores.

The area that Jesus traveled to the east side of the Sea of Galilee is not in Israel today it is in Jordan. And there, in Jordan, where Jesus came ashore is a very very old church—a church in which Christians have worshiped for millennia. It is believed that that church in Jordan was built after Jesus’ brief visit to the Gerasene people on the eastern shores of the Galilee. That church—built so long ago—is still a house of worship today. That church built after Jesus’ visit to the Gerasene people is a place that Christians still gather and remember Jesus, who came into their lives and never really went away.

Like our ancient brothers and sisters, we may tell Jesus to go away but Jesus never really leaves us.

We may say don’t touch me, don’t help me, don’t heal me, don’t come close... we may run away.

We may confront Jesus and tell him directly: go away, we are too scared, you are too powerful, this is too hard.

But the good news is that Jesus never really leaves us.

Ever.

We are stuck with Jesus.

Turn away, we might.

Run away, we do.

Tell him to leave us alone, we try.

But Jesus remains in our lives.

Some of you were raised in the church and then left the church for years...some of you grew up Catholic, some Methodist, Presbyterian, Baptist. Organized religion hurt you, said you were not acceptable, or not good enough. You have told me so many painful stories. But that was organized religion speaking, it was not God. It was never God. God did not say you are not acceptable, you are not good enough. God said, I will never leave you. Even if you leave me.

Even if you tell me to go away, even if you run the other way, I will not leave you.
You are stuck with me.

Most of us experience our faith as cycling through periods of more and then less intensity. That is normal. But no matter where we are in our journey, the sign that hangs in our Narthex is right: "Bidden or unbidden, God is near."

Whether we call upon God or not, God is near.

Whether we turn to God or not, God is near.

Whether we tell God to come close or go away, God is near.

Whether we ask God to enter our longing hearts or tell God to leave us alone, God is near.

Whether we need God or not, God is near.

God is always near.

Today, a little church stands in Jordan marking the visit of a powerful prophet, mystic, healer and teacher 2,000 years ago. As far as Biblical historians can tell, Jesus made ONE short trip to that area. One visit, long ago. And yet a church in Jordan still stands at that spot and Christians still worship there today.

Go away Jesus, the people said when Jesus stepped out of the boat and onto their shores.

Go away Jesus, we often say.

The good news is Jesus does not go away.

We're stuck with him.

And he with us.

Now and forever.

O thanks be to God.

Amen.