

"So, What Does Jesus Have to Do with Me"

Time after Pentecost – Lectionary 12
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Sunday, June 20, 2010
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Isaiah 65:1-9; Galatians 3:23-29; Luke 8:26-39

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

"What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God?" I find that question from the mouth of the demon-possessed man in Luke's Gospel so interesting. Just who's doing the asking here? The demon, or legion of demons that possess the man? Or the man himself? Or both and all? Luke says the demons were fearful Jesus would exorcise the man and send the demon spirits into the abyss. So, it seems logical the demon(s) would ask, "What have you to do with me, Jesus?"

Yet it could just as likely be the man himself asking that question—what do you want with me, Jesus? What do you want from me? Because I believe that kind of question is something we humans ask God. Sometimes we ask it in great humility and faithfulness: What do you want from me, Lord? How can I best serve you? How should I follow you? But sometimes we ask that question because we're fearful what God might **expect** of us. Or we're reluctant to relinquish whatever it is God thinks we clutch too tightly to us. Or we're just stubborn enough in our *status quo* to resist being changed by God into a new "us." After all, most of us have figured out a way to manage a comfortable existence. And so our words and deeds often seem to speak this: We're doing fine on our own, God, thank you very much. When we need you, we'll let you know.

That is where the people of Israel found themselves in our Old Testament lesson. In Isaiah we read about this disconnect between the deep, daily relationship the Lord God wanted with his people, and the detached type of relationship the people themselves wanted. After suffering a long exile in a foreign land, back home to a place that wasn't half as delightful as Israel was led to believe, the people questioned whether to remain committed to this God of theirs who was remarkably demanding for seeming so strangely absent. "What have you to do with us, Lord God?" Israel might well have been asking. It was much easier to follow their own devices, walk in their own ways, even if those ways were ultimately contrary to the way commanded by the Lord God.

Lutheran Pastor Dan Bollerud writes that Israel's behavior here reminds him of when one of his children would wander off in a store. Dan would follow the child up and down the aisles, but remain out of sight to see how long it would take his child to realize they were lost, and begin to cry out for Daddy. Then Dan would appear, comfort them, and have a "teachable moment" with them. Sometimes, though, the child never realized they were lost. Dan would have to meet up with them, and they would say, "Oh, Daddy, there you are," as if **they'd** found **him**. Then they'd go on their merry way, getting lost in the aisles once more.

See, contrary to Israel's claims, God had not been absent at all! We read in Isaiah how God had been waiting all along for Israel to come to him. To use Dan Bollerud's image, God was there in the aisles of life, waiting patiently for his people to realize they needed God in their lives, needed his presence, comfort and teaching. Isaiah declares that God called out, "Here I am, here I am," yet the people did not look for him, ignored his invitation, and then when they did recognize his presence, they said to God, "...do not come near me..." Or basically, "What have you to do with me, God?"

This is the same state of affairs for the demon-possessed man and his community when Jesus arrives in the country of the Gerasenes in our Gospel. Now the people of Gerasenes, a primarily Gentile region, exist each day without a real relationship with God. They are accustomed to that way of life. It's not that things were perfect in this territory. Quite the contrary. There were demonic forces in that land, and although the people couldn't defeat the evil demons, they could partially control them. Kind of. Sort of. They figured out a way to "manage" the demons. What they did was shackle and place under guard the man in whom those demons resided so he couldn't hurt himself or the community. Of course, that only worked for awhile; eventually the possessed man broke through his shackles. Then, fortunately for the community, he isolated himself from the community by dwelling in the area of the tombs. Not much of a life for the man—feared by the community, living in loneliness in the tombs. But up until the day Jesus arrived, that's how the people managed the situation. You can almost hear them say, "This is how we do things in Gerasenes." There was this *status quo* about them all, including the possessed man, that resisted being changed into something new. "What have you to do with us, Jesus?" could easily have been the question on everyone's lips.

For much of our Old Testament lesson today, we hear judgment. We learn of Israel's refusal to accept God's invitation to life. We learn of God's righteous anger and his call for punishment. But there is this sliver of light emanating from the last couple verses—a promise of something beyond judgment. Isaiah prophesies, "Thus says the Lord: As the wine is found in the cluster, and they say, 'Do not destroy it, for there is a blessing in it,' so I will do for my servants' sake, and not destroy them all..." That "cluster" refers to very fine grapes found in the midst of the vine. That cluster of grapes is a remnant of faithful people God promises to raise up who will finally live with him in that deep, daily relationship. Isaiah and those who heard Isaiah's words had no way of knowing just how the Lord God would do this. And it's clear throughout the Old Testament and Inter-Testamental periods that God's people still strayed, still wandered up and down the aisles on their own, not heeding God's guidance. So where was that cluster to be found?

It would be in the person of Jesus. In his ministry of healing, preaching, and teaching you and I see that cluster of grapes, that sliver of light. Jesus, Son of the Most High, is the one in whom hope and a future are found. The man possessed of many demons discovers just that. When he is healed of his demons, and in his right mind, he wants to follow Jesus, stay in that life-giving relationship with him.

The man knows he's been changed into someone new, and he knows Jesus is the one who did it. His community, on the other hand, will take longer to realize this; they are afraid of what Jesus can do, afraid of his power, their economic livelihood having been somewhat challenged by the death of many pigs that day. It will require that healed man, now a believer in Jesus, Son of God, to help them. In fact, that's the commission Jesus gives the man: "Return to your home, and declare how much God has done for you." Luke tells us the man obeyed, returned home, and declared how much Jesus had done.

In my announcements, I mentioned the church office is closed this coming week for carpeting and painting. This required the staff to pack up everything in their offices, from the contents of desks to the artwork on the walls. I even removed my bulletin board, taking down items I'd tacked on it over the years. There were photographs of people at whose baptisms I officiated—infants, and grown-ups, too. Many of these folks are active in the life of this congregation—it is delightful to see them grow, physically and spiritually. There were photos of me leading new members classes—it is my privilege to minister side-by-side with members new to this faith community.

There was a photo of Jalexsis, the 2nd grade student at Foose Elementary School whom I tutored last year. I remember how she struggled with math. I remember also she was very needy, and hungry for love. There was a scrap of paper with a name written on it—Renee. I once mentioned Renee in a sermon here. She was an inmate at Dauphin County Prison, and attended a worship service I led there. Afterwards she came up to me and said, "My name is Renee. Please pray for me." So I wrote her name on a slip of paper to remember. I wish I knew how both Jalexsis and Renee were doing. I hope they know God's presence in their lives, and have a community of faith to help sustain them. But I'm afraid, given their situations, they may be, in a sense, like that man in the Gospel lesson, living in the tombs.

There was another slip of paper on my bulletin board. It had four sentences on it—can't remember where I read them, but I saved them. It is a brief "summation" of the most important points of the Augsburg Confession, part of our Lutheran statements of faith. I also think those four sentences sum up our Gospel lesson pretty well:

- 1. God is God.**
- 2. We are not.**
- 3. What we aren't, Jesus is.**
- 4. What Jesus is, we become.**

"What have you to do with us, Jesus?" We learn today that Jesus will have everything to do with us. He is our healing and our forgiveness and our transformation. He is our future, as well as the path **to** our future. He will have everything to do with our being changed into someone new, a new "us." So set in our ways, almost downright comfortable without our Lord are we, wandering up and

down the aisles of life, but he has come to be with us anyway, and work God's purposes in and through us. That's what our Lord Jesus has to do with us.

And our response? "Go and declare how much God has done for us." Every one of us here has been commissioned to do that, from the newly-baptized whose photos adorned my bulletin board to the congregational member who has been part of Trinity for years. We are to go to the places where our gifts are most needed, sometimes even to scary places which have become tombs for others. But we are sent nonetheless, that we might also declare what God can do for them. **AMEN.**