North Kildonan United Church

19th June 2022 ~*Rev. Don Johnson*

I Kings 19: 1-15a Galatians 3: 23-29 Luke 8: 26-39-15

Eternal God,
in the reading of the Scripture, may your Word be heard;
in the meditations of our hearts, may your Word be known;
and in the faithfulness of our lives, may your Word be shown. Amen.

"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.

In our reading from Luke we heard of an encounter Jesus had with a man possessed by demons. The poor man's life had been a living nightmare, and the local people struggled to cope with his outbursts, his anger and violent actions. They would shackle him in chains in an attempt to control him and to protect themselves from him, often to no avail.

Clearly the man was in misery. He was without clothing and he made his home in amongst the dead in the tombs. He was at the mercy, though mercy is definitely the wrong word to use, of the demons within him. This man, who knew no home for himself, had become the home for many demons, and they controlled him.

When Jesus encounters this man, the man does not seek healing or liberation from the demons. Fearful that he will suffer more if Jesus attempts to free him from these oppressive forces in his life, the man pleads with Jesus to not aggravate the demons. "I beg you, do not torment me" he says. Just leave me be, if you try to change the situation things will only get worse.

But the compassion of Jesus will not ignore the pain of another person. Jesus commands the unclean spirit to leave this man alone, though in fact there were many demons, many unclean spirits nestled in this man, tormenting him and depriving him of the fullness of life God desires for all.

Jesus demands the name of the demon and is told that is it "Legion", as in a large number. These demons understand full well the power Jesus possesses, so they beg him to leave them alone, let them remain in this poor man and maintain a home there, instead of being cast into the abyss.

Faced with the power of Jesus, the legion of demons leave the man and enter into a herd of swine, where they quickly meet their end as the swine cast themselves into the lake and are drowned.

On the surface, it's a bizarre story, seemingly more like the work of a short Netflix movie than anything else. Think of what we have in this gospel.

We have a man who is totally unable to direct his life because of inner forces controlling him.

We have a herd of innocent swine, unfortunate animals who meet an untimely death through no cause of their own.

We have, though not mentioned, the owner of the herd, who has just suffered a sizeable economic loss.

And, we have the issue of demonic possession.

Let's look a bit closer at this story, this gospel, and see what good news we might find here this day. But first, hear this disclaimer by Brendan Byrne in his commentary The Hospitality of God, A Reading of Luke's Gospel.

'The episode is one of the most curious in the Gospels. Taking it on a historical level to any degree unleashes a whole host of issues (such as Jesus' apparent indifference to the loss occurred by the owners of the pigs). Variations in the manuscript tradition as to the location of the incident, together with so many aspects that seem inflated in the way of folklore, render futile any attempt to reconstruct a historical basis for the tradition."

In the times in which this story is set, strange behaviour was usually ascribed to external, malevolent sources or powers. Nowadays strange, unsettling behaviour is often written off by others as being high on something, drugs or alcohol, or being afflicted with mental illness. How many people living on the street, asking for spare change at intersections or going from one outreach mission to another, are in that situation through no fault of their own? They know too well the power of demons in their lives, demons in the form of addiction or abuse from family that makes living at home impossible, demons in the guise of so-called friends who rob the person of their meagre possessions and their sense of self-worth and dignity, demons in the voices that sow seeds of hopelessness and despair. Demons that are not the work of the devil but are all too clearly the evidence of the darkness of the human condition. People think of heaven and hell as the future but for far too many, this beautiful earth, full of potential and joy and love, has sadly become for them their own hell. The demons are not supernatural; they are all too real, too present, too human.

All of us have our own demons, our frustrations and lingering fears, our worries and wonderings and disappointments we find hard to shake off. We might not be actually addicted to something, or to someone, but we might come close to it sometimes.

A bit over a decade ago, Betty White appeared in a Super Bowl commercial. She was a part of a football practice with a team of young men. At one point she is tackled

and lands in a muddy, wet spot on the field. The other players were harassing her because she wasn't playing to her usual standard-as one of the other players said: "Mike, you're playing like Betty White." A Snickers bar appeared, and was given to Betty. Instantly she was transformed into Mike, the young male football player. The commercial ends with a voice proclaiming, "You're not you when you're hungry."

That's actually amazingly accurate, which is probably partly why this commercial, and others like it, are so popular.

You're not you when you're hungry or thirsty or fearful or at risk or whatever else it is that troubles and challenges us.

When Jesus asked the man his name, he couldn't even offer his own name, all he could say was "Legion" which means a multitude. He was so possessed by his situation that he had lost control of himself, was unable to be a safe presence amongst others. His identity as a human being, loved by God and worthy of the love of others, was lost in that legion of challenges, that fearful darkness, within him.

He needed a restoration of his identity, healing from the demons within, freedom to begin again to take his place within the community and live the gift of life.

Jesus drives the demons out of him and this man becomes a new man. The once naked, out of control, raging man is now found by the townsfolk sitting calmly at the feet of Jesus, clothed and, as Luke says, "in his right mind."

And how do the townsfolk respond to this joyous rebirth, the restoration of this man once lost but now found? They are full of fear and ask Jesus to get out of their town. Hear again the concluding sentences of today's reading: "So Jesus got into the boat and returned. The man from whom the demons had gone begged that he might be with him; but Jesus sent him away, saying, '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.

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The healing Luke writes about was an act of love and compassion by Jesus. And it was a healing not to be kept quiet but rather to be told to whoever might hear, that God, the God of love, wills us to fullness of life, free of those demons which pull us down and rob us of joy and happiness.

We may not have the power to heal, but we do have the ability to listen and care when those in our life are hurting and weighed down with worry. Sometimes people just need to talk, to put things into perspective, to hear a different viewpoint and some alternative possibilities, to silence, if only for a while, the demons we feel we have within us. But perhaps mainly just to talk and in the talking hope is rekindled and new pathways

begin to appear. And in that talking and in that generous listening, the love of Jesus is lived out and shared, and the way of healing opened up.

A few weeks back I quoted Mother Julian of Norwich. She's worth hearing anytime, but I think especially today. She wrote, all those centuries ago:

"No one listens, they tell me, and so I listen and I tell them what they have just told me. And I sit in silence, listening to them, letting them grieve.

'Julian, you are wise' they say, 'you have been gifted with understanding'. All I did was listen. For I believe full surely that God's spirit is in us all…" Amen.