

The Gerasene legion

In 1973 the band Pink Floyd released an album called Dark Side of the Moon. It was a theme album – one of the first of its kind. It revolved around a theme that could be called “the human condition.” It dealt with issues like money and greed, conflict, the passing of time, mental illness and death. It was on the Billboard top 200 albums for almost three years.

One of the tracks, Brain Damage, still gets pretty frequent play time on classic rock radio stations. It was apparently inspired by the band’s relationship with the group’s founder, Syd Barrett. Barrett struggled with mental illness and drug use that eventually led to his ouster from the band.

One of the verses goes like this:

The lunatic is in my head
The lunatic is in my head
You raise the blade, you make the change
You re-arrange me 'til I'm sane
You lock the door
And throw away the key
There's someone in my head but it's not me

I often think of that song when I read some of the demon possession stories in the Bible, especially this one.

There’s someone in my head but it’s not me.

We in this 21st Century struggle a bit with the notion of demons. On the one hand, we would likely conclude that this man had some form of mental illness. Today he would likely receive anti-psychotic medication.

But at the same time, we use the term “demons” pretty easily. We say that people who struggle with addictions, mental illness, the effects of past trauma and so on are battling demons.

It’s like we sort of innately get that although science leads us to understand mental illness and other ills differently than in Jesus’ day, there’s still something that makes the word demon fit.

Even with depression, I know from personal experience it can feel very much like something foreign has invaded your mind.

This story reminds us that there are still powerful forces in the world that work against what God wants for us. For many of them we can give good scientific and medical explanations, but the experience can still be quite demonic.

The story also reminds us that Jesus is always for us and that Jesus' power can overcome those forces.

The story itself has so many layers, we can't cover every angle, but ultimately it's a story of Christ's power versus the power of evil.

People are often bothered by the fate of the pigs – I mean what did they ever do to anybody? But there's some symbolism here that helps us make some connections in the story.

First of all, the demon-invaded pigs perish in the sea. The scene of the pigs going over the cliff and being swallowed by the sea would bring to mind an image from Israel's past...an image of Pharaoh's Egyptian army perishing in the sea as the Israelites made their way to freedom so long ago.

But in many ways, Egypt really stands for all the forces that keep God's people bound...whether it's in literal slavery or slavery to an addiction or money and possessions or an impossible physical ideal or any one of a number of demons that still plague us.

The Israelites never saw the defeat of Pharaoh's army as anything short of God's victory over evil.

Next thing to look at is the name of the demons. Legion...a legion was the name for a Roman military unit. It was roughly equivalent to a division. A legion typically had about 6000 soldiers. 6000 demons set up shop in this guy's head.

A whole legion of demons perished as the pigs were swallowed up by the sea. Perhaps this symbolism gave hope to a people under an oppressive regime...maybe Jesus could conquer even the evil of the Roman Empire.

Thinking about those ideas, this story is the big story of God's victory over evil, writ large on the world stage. The reign of God...the kingdom of God... will not include oppressive human powers that keep anyone from the life God wants for them. That's good news about all the societal evils we are plagued with...racism, sexism, greed, violence, sex trafficking and so on.

But the story also comes down to one man and his community. What's heartbreakingly absent from this story is a joyful reaction to this man's healing on the part of his fellow citizens. Nobody seems to be happy for him.

The swineherds and the owners of the pigs are understandably upset about the loss of the pigs. That is a huge economic hit.

The people are afraid...they'd gotten used to the demon-possessed man being as he was. What would happen now? What would it mean to try to bring this man back in to the community?

Defeating evil spirits...defeating demons...comes at a cost. Were the folks in this story willing to pay that cost?

Defeating evil disturbs the status quo. And although the demons left this man, the forces of evil still want Jesus out of their country. He's too upsetting...his power too frightening.

This story helps us see maybe a bit how the societal demons in our own time and place resist and push back.

When one reads the history of African Americans in this country, racism is the demon that just keeps fighting back. Each time new rights...new freedoms have been won, a powerful backlash has developed.

When the cost of upsetting the status quo seems too high, or impacts us, suddenly we're not so sure defeating evil completely and for good and all is what we really want.

We are always inclined to divide the world into good people and bad people. But it doesn't work that way. Gradually, we begin to see that defeating evil is much more complicated than we thought.

We are all created good by God. We all still have that goodness. But there remain powerful forces that lead to evil and we are all vulnerable to those forces.

Maybe you've had the experience of doing or saying something that was totally out of character...that hurt someone you never wanted to hurt.

You too might say, along with Pink Floyd, there's someone in my head but it's not me.

Surely something demonic possessed Nazi Germany when nearly a whole nation stood by as 6 million Jews were murdered. Before it all, one assumes they were rather ordinary people, created good by a God who loves them.

Social scientists and psychologists devote their life's work to understanding mental illness, addiction, and late effects of childhood trauma. They look at brain chemistry and neural networks. Those studies have enabled treatments for illnesses like the one this man had.

Scientists work to understand the motivations behind violence against others or against oneself. They study what happens when a crowd moves from peaceful to violence and what happens when a nation practices genocide.

Most sociologists and psychologists would likely not use the term demon for any of these things, at least not in the biblical sense. But in the end that probably doesn't matter – Jesus has still enlisted them in this fight against the demons that plague us, individually and as a people.

We have all had our own demons. Growth in faith and spiritual health keeps them from being in charge of our lives, but they typically don't go away. It remains part of the human condition that there's someone in our head that's not the real us.

Our task in prayer and spirituality is to recognize that demon and let God shrink it and...maybe even cast it out.

What controls you? What keeps you bound up...stuck? What is keeping our society bound up...stuck? What's in your head that you know isn't who you really are?

Is it a demon that keeps telling you that you're not good enough...that nobody loves you and never will?

Demons of hatred, prejudice, envy, greed, fear, low self-esteem...all of them, left unchecked contribute to a lot of human misery.

Often those demons hide behind layers of self-righteousness and self-justification – we hide them as best we can, even from ourselves.

I tend to think I'm pretty spiritually fit...but once in a while, all of a sudden I'm surprised by a thought that is hateful or bigoted or judgmental, and I can feel like there's someone in my head but it's not me.

When we begin to fight our demons, it can be surprising how hard it is – like the healed man's fellow citizens, we find we've gotten rather used to them. The cost of change may seem too high and we're pretty content with the status quo.

Well, the first step toward conquering our demons is to name them. Honesty about the demons in ourselves...and in our society...is a necessary step.

Jesus calls you to name that thing in your head that's not you...just like he got the demons to say their name.

But then Jesus goes beyond naming. Jesus also sees the real us underneath the demon...Jesus sees the beloved child of God who was created good...created in God's image.

No matter what we have done...no matter what demons we have been influenced by our continue to be influenced by, Jesus sees you...the real you...the beloved you.

And Jesus works, continually, throughout our lives, to send those demons packing.