23 June 2019 St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Pentecost 2 Vienna, VA

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"Set Free by Jesus"
Text: Luke 8:26-39; Galatians 3:23-4:7

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

I'm not saying you have a demon . . . but have you ever been driven by something within you, like the man we heard about in the Gospel today?

It was in the country of the Gerasenes, up north, east of Galilee. Jesus crossed over the Sea of Galilee with His disciples, as He often did. And this day, when He stepped out onto the shore, this man met Him. Who had demons. Plural. A great many of them. Legion. He was their home. And they didn't want to leave.

By the time they speak, we find out that Jesus had already commanded them to come out. Jesus knew the man's plight, and as He always does, had compassion on him, to set him free from this scourge that had bound him for apparently some time. For he was well known in the region. They had tried to control him with guards and chains and shackles. But nothing worked. Until now. Until Jesus.

It was the demons' worst nightmare. The day they dreaded. The Almighty God had come to earth in the man Jesus of Nazareth. When Jesus spoke, they knew the voice. It was the voice of the Creator. The voice of the One they had rebelled against and so had been thrown down from heaven to the earth. And so now homeless, they were in search of a home. Which they found in this man. Until now. Until Jesus.

So when they heard that voice, coming out of this man, they panicked. They fall down before Jesus - not that they wanted to! - and shriek, ***What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I beg you, do not torment me***. They knew the day was coming, when they would be cast into the abyss, but not yet! Please, not yet! Let us go into the pigs instead, Jesus. Jesus allows them to, and at once, the herd rushes down the steep bank into the Sea of Galilee, and is drowned. Did the demons make the pigs do that? Or did the pigs do that to get away from the demons?

But the man, he is set free. The Word of God, His Saviour, set him free.

Now what about you?

I'm not saying you have a demon . . . but have you ever been driven by something within you, like the man we heard about in the Gospel today? Something that is tormenting *you*?

Maybe your anger, which causes you to lash out at others, and hurt them with your words or deeds. Or maybe for you it is lust that drives you to do things that are hurtful, shameful, and harmful to yourself and others. What about envy? Has your desire for something driven you to covet what another has and so get it for yourself? Pride sometimes drives us to do anything, to say anything, to protect our place and reputation. Even something like despair can drive us and control us into withdrawing into our own deserts and separating ourselves from those we are to love and serve. And if you're like me, you do these things even though you don't want to. Even though you know they're wrong. Even though you don't want to be driven by these things, and yet . . . there they are.

So I'm not saying you have a demon . . . but maybe the sin in us makes us more like this man than we'd care to admit.

So how good that the voice which commanded the demons to come out of that man, the voice that caused the demons to panic and flee, still sounds forth today. To you. Here. In compassion. His voice that sounded forth when you were baptized, when you were - as Paul said today to the Galatians - ***adopted as sons*** (and daughters) ***of God***. And His voice that tells you: *I forgive you all your sins*. That is to say, I set you free from the guilt and condemnation of your sin. For all the sin your anger causes, all the sin that blossoms from your lust, all the sin your envy drives you to do, all the sin your pride wells up in you, all your sin, *period* - I took it, Jesus says. Like when I told the demons they could go into the pigs. All your sin and guilt and condemnation - I told it, I *commanded* it, to come upon me. And I went not into the Sea with it to be drowned, but to the cross, to be consumed by it there. For you. So that you be set free. Like that man. That man now clothed and in his right mind again. Now you are clothed with my righteousness, and have a mind that thinks right again.

Because, as St. Paul continued in his letter to the Galatians, explaining this: ***Because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!" So you are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a son, then an heir through God***. No longer a slave to your desires and urges. No longer a slave to your sins. You have a new Spirit, a right Spirit, the Holy Spirit, now given to you. That you now *be* who you *are*: a son, a daughter, of God.

The devil's not going to stop trying, though, to lure you back into sin, back into the captivity Jesus has set you free from. Trying to get you to be who you're not anymore. Making captivity look like freedom and freedom look like captivity. Making evil look good and good look evil. Making you doubt Jesus' Word - that that's not really who you are. For look at yourself! Child of God? *As if!*

It's a trick, really, as old as time. To label people according to their darkest moment or greatest mistake. Like this man Jesus set free. When the people in that region came out and saw the man sitting with Jesus and clothed and in his right mind . . . ***they were afraid***. Of what? Of who? Of the man, that this was just a trick? Or Jesus?

Because everyone knows this guy is a demoniac! He can't be trusted. He can't *really* be free. *And you?* Everyone knows you're the person who got caught doing . . . what? You're the divorcee. You're the adulterer. You're the cheater. You're the unreliable one. You're the denier, the doubter, the coward. And even if everyone doesn't know, *you do*. And the devil likes to remind you every chance he gets. To convince you *that's* who you really are! You are your greatest sin. You are your darkest moment. You are who you are at your worst.

Until now. Until Jesus. Who comes along and speaks a completely different word. Who doesn't define you by your darkest moment or your greatest sin, but says: **you are who *I* say you are**. And I say: you are my child. You are forgiven. You are defined not by your word, the devil's word, or the world's word - but by MY word. Because Jesus' word, the Creator's word, is a powerful word, a Spirit-filled word, and does what it says. When He speaks forgiveness, you are. When He speak life, you have it. When He speaks salvation, you are free. Like that man. The people were afraid of him, had him labeled and pegged. And maybe the world has done that to you, and maybe you've done it to yourself, as well. But Jesus speaks a different word, a better word. And that word is truth.

Not surprisingly, then, the man wanted to stay with Jesus. He begged Jesus, even. For why stay among those who labeled him and were afraid of him? Wouldn't it be better to stay with Jesus, the compassionate one? And he was probably right. Better, and certainly it would be easier. Just like it would be easier for us to stay here, within the walls and confines of the church. To stay with Jesus and not go out into a world that doesn't like what we believe very much, and has certain choice labels for us.

But Jesus has other plans. ***Return to your home***, He tells the man, ***and declare how much God has done for you***. And the man did. And, I have to believe, with more than his words. Just his very presence among the people, dressed and in his right mind, was a testimony to them of what Jesus had done. And maybe, over time, his label changed. From the man who was possessed by demons, to the man Jesus set free. That would be a good change. For him, and for others.

And so are we sent. To our homes, to our workplaces, to our schools, to our neigborhoods, to ***declare how much God has done for you***. And you do that with your words, yes. But also with your deeds. Your forgiveness for others. Your love and compassion. Your good and helpful and serving works. How you label others not with their darkest moments and greatest sins, but looking at them with new eyes. *Jesus*' eyes.

The way He looked at people. For His Spirit has been given to you. To set you free from the old to live a new life.

We're not told if Jesus and this man ever crossed paths again - at least, not on this side of eternity. But good news for you! You do! Here, every Sunday. As Jesus comes here for you every week, with His Word, with His forgiveness, and to feed you with His own Body and Blood. And you get to hear, you get to receive, you get to eat. And so every week you are assured of who you are - that you believe not the voice within you, or what the world says, or what the devil would like you to believe. Every week you hear of the cross and the forgiveness Jesus won for you there. Every week you are strengthened by the Spirit, that those old urges and desires control you less and less. And every week you eat and drink from the new tree of life. And if you listen with your new ears, your ears of faith, you can hear the demons shrieking, and the angels singing with us. *Glory to God in the highest! Holy, holy holy!* For Jesus is here.

Last week, we heard the Jewish leaders accuse Jesus of having a demon. Today, we heard of a man who really did. And how there was only one thing that really possessed Jesus: **love**. His love for you and your salvation. No matter who you are, where you're from, or what you've done. Or as we sang:

See, how He sends the pow'rs of evil reeling;
He brings us freedom, light and life and healing.
All men and women, who by guilt are driven,
Now are forgiven (LSB #825 v. 2).

Forgiven. Set free. Children of God. In Jesus. <u>That's</u> who you are.

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.