
Demons and Memories

**An article for *The Cathedral Times*
by the Very Rev. Sam Candler**

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This past Monday, as I prayed the Office of Morning Prayer, I read the gospel lesson for the day, the fairly familiar story of the “Gerasene Demoniac” (Luke 8:26-39). It’s a pretty ugly story.

Essentially, Jesus encounters a man who has demons; the man wears no clothes and lives “not in a house but in the tombs.” When Jesus commands the unclean spirit to leave the man, he also asks the demon, “What is your name?” The man—or unclean spirit—replies, “Legion.” The gospel writer explains that *many* demons had entered the man.

The story continues that the demons ask Jesus that they be cast into a herd of swine on the hillside, and Jesus gives them permission. The demons come out of the man and enter the swine; the herd then rushes down a steep bank into a lake, where they drown. The man who had been notoriously possessed is healed, and the people of the surrounding country are so overwhelmed, maybe in fear, maybe in awe, that they ask Jesus to leave. They don’t get it.

In this fall season, as our nights get longer, it seems that we tend to spend more time in bed. There is not as much light outside, and we live in more darkness. But we don’t always sleep there in bed, do we? Night times can be the times when worries and anxieties and fears can be the most paralyzing. They wake us up at odd hours. They prevent us from returning to sleep. In fact, some of our dreams are so terrifying that we do not want to return to sleep. We worry about relationships and family. We worry about money. We worry about the past; we worry about the future. I often describe these night terrors as demons. And those demons can be many; they are legion.

It interests me that the Gerasene demoniac lived among the tombs. Tombs, of course, are where we place the bodies of our dead. They mark the bodies of our loved ones, representing good times and bad times, things done and things left undone. In ancient times, the word, “tomb” could mean “memorial,” and even “remembrance.” Today, the tombstones of our old family members are where we remember them.

It strikes me that the Gerasene demoniac lived among the old memories of people. The Gerasene demoniac lived in the tombs because that is where all our memory demons are. At night, our unconscious journeys back through our memories; and, in those tombs, the unconscious discovers all sorts of worries and neglects. Thus, our memories can be the very places where we are not at rest; they are where we still worry about things undone, and where we worry about things done to us. Our memories are where we have been hurt and damaged. Our memories are where our demons are.

Truly good healers—priests and rabbis and therapists—can sometimes help us explore our memories. Some truly good healers—therapists, rabbis, priests—can even help us understand our dreams, those night occasions when our unconscious shows us something about ourselves that we had forgotten, or even repressed. Not all dreams do this, of course; but some might.

The point is that our memories need the healing touch of a higher power, a power of grace and good—a power many of us know as Jesus, who was unafraid to speak to the legion of demons occupying the Gerasene man. It takes courage to face our memories, especially when we begin to realize that they contain pain as well as joy. Our memories can be occupied by frightening demons, the demons who live among our unconscious tombs and memorials. Those memories can be even more frightening when they emerge and enter other living beings

—like the herd of pigs—and cause harm to them. Maybe that is why the crowd in the Gerasene story was actually afraid after this event.

The wise family systems therapist, Ed Friedman (he was also a rabbi), used to say, “Hurt people hurt people.” That is to say: people who have been hurt emotionally and psychologically end up passing that hurt and damage to other people, often without realizing it. On the other hand, a healthy family—like a healthy community—can somehow bear emotional pain and thus disempower it, dissolving its power. The truly powerful among us, like Jesus of Nazareth, have that strength; they bear pain, and even demon possession, without transmitting it to another person. They let the demons go. As these fall nights get longer and darker, I hope that we, too, can practice the letting go of our night time demons.

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Sam Candler". The signature is written in black ink and has a long, horizontal flourish extending to the right.

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