

The reading from 1 Kings this morning told us how, after Elijah had killed all the false prophets of Jezebel with the sword at Mount Carmel, he became afraid when threatened by Queen Jezebel. He ran away into the wilderness, and finally, overwhelmed with exhaustion, he dropped to the ground under a tree and asked that he might die. "It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors."

Folks have speculated long and hard about Elijah at this point in his life. Perhaps the killing of all those prophets forced him into depression, even though it had illustrated, even for him, the high power of God. Perhaps he couldn't stand the fact that, after such a mighty participation in the power of God, he was still so afraid for his own life in the face of the threats by Jezebel. Perhaps Elijah was simply worn out, burned out, empty. .. Whatever caused Elijah to cry out to God to take his life, God reached out to him, fed and rested him, and then asked him, "What are you doing, Elijah?" Winds came, and an earthquake, and then a fire... But what released Elijah to continue in life was God calling his name in the midst of sheer silence. "What are you doing here, Elijah?" Elijah confessed himself, his loneliness, and God told him to get up and go to Damascus. God gave him direction. God released Elijah from his need to hide in fear.

In the Gospel lesson, another man was released by the healing power of God. Jesus had scarcely gotten out of his boat before he was accosted by the "Gerasene demoniac." The man wore no clothes and was homeless, living among the tombs. He was so tormented by his condition that the people of his town had tried to chain him up, but he had broken the chains and run into the wilderness. This demented man saw Jesus and fell down before him as the demons within him recognized who Jesus was: "What have you to do with me, Son of the Most High God? I beg you, do not torment me.." When Jesus asked him his name, he replied, "Legion," which was a number. A Roman legion numbered 5000-6000; for the man who was possessed, this term probably meant that he was overwhelmed by many, many things.

Just about everybody who has heard this story has wondered why Jesus would let the pigs be killed. Some have tried to explain that in Jewish thought pigs were unclean and thus not worth anything. Many, however, have agonized over Jesus' apparent disregard for the economic rights of those who owned the pigs, especially since the event took place in Gentile, not Jewish, territory. I cannot say why Jesus did this, except to say that this story is not meant to tell about swine but about Jesus' power to save those whose lives have been bound by Legions of demons.

Preacher Donald Chatfield imagined a possible statement by the healed demoniac, which I share with you now:

It was Jesus. I saw him, even through the dark clouds in my mind. I saw him! I hadn't seen anything for so long, the clouds were so dark. But I saw him, like light through all those clouds. And I yelled at him, and ran to him. Oh, how the Bad Ones inside me struggled to stop me! They didn't want to be near Jesus. But I took them by surprise. They hadn't heard from me in so many years, they had forgotten I was in there. I rushed at Jesus before they could stop my legs

from moving. They tried to stop my voice, but I told them, "What have you to do with me?" Then I shouted at him, "Jesus, Son of the Most High God, I beg you, don't let them torment me!"

But by then they had taken back control of my voice, and they made me say, "Don't torment me!" But Jesus knew! He wasn't fooled. Helpless as I was, I was thrilled when he said to them, "What's your name?" Because they had to answer. They'd never had to answer anyone before. They tried to frighten him: "Legion," they growled. His eyes flashed, and they were afraid. "Don't send us back into the Pit again!" they cried. Jesus stood there looking at my eyes, and suddenly I knew: he could see ME! The real me! The Bad Ones lost their grip on me in that instant. I looked around. I saw those swine over in the field. I lifted my arm - I could do it! - and pointed at the pigs. Jesus smiled. He gave me a little nod. Then he lifted his own arm and pointed. Something broke, and I felt a long, terrible ripping down the center of me, then they were gone! And THEN the pigs ran down into the water and drowned.

I could see! hear! smell! I could feel again! How wonderful it was, the breeze on my skin, the light on the water, the gentle sound of the waves on the pebbles. How wonderful the sound of his voice. I could have sat at his feet and listened forever. I wanted to go with him when they made him leave. But he stopped at the water's edge, put his hand on my shoulder, and said, "I will be with you always, to the end of the age. Go back home and tell them all what great things God has done for you."

So I'm telling you. Jesus has done great things for me. He is the Son of the Most High God. He will do great things for you, too. Call out to him, and let him look through all your clouds, deep into your eyes. Jesus can see the real you. Jesus can set you free for life. Thanks be to God!
(Donald F. Chatfield - source uncertain, *not* found in his book, *Dinner With Jesus*)

These days we call our demons names like epilepsy, depression, substance abuse, mental illness, prejudice, anxiety, apathy, to name a few... Psychiatrists say that depression is the most common emotional problem in America. If you watch the national 6:00 p.m. news, you know that depression is a favorite advertizing target, right up there with ED, irregular bowels, along with several others. Depression's basic component a loss of hope. To have hope is to believe that something will get better, make sense, or end up okay. Lots of folks don't have much hope today.

Time and again I have heard folks agonize over the state of life today: the corruption, the plight of older persons who live, in their own eyes, "too long," unemployment, the seemingly endless areas of war and suffering and cheating throughout the world; the political swamp of our own Congress. We have too much information about how messed up things are and too little power to change anything.

Dr. Paul Tournier was a renowned Swiss physician and psychological counselor and the author of many books. Tournier's young son once defined the challenge for many when he told his father: "Everything's always okay, except for something." There always seems to be "something" to keep us from being free to celebrate our lives, from being free... Sometimes the

"somethings" are small and not terribly hurtful; sometimes the "somethings" are so life-destroying that they can rob us of health and life. The message we are invited to hear from the scriptures is the promise that God wants to release us from that "something," from whatever it is that binds us, from whatever keeps us from being able to live our lives in such a way as to glorify God and fully use what God has given us.

God told Elijah, when Elijah was overwhelmed by life, "Be still and know..." Too often we rush around and guess. We hurry to get past our troubles or to blot them out of our consciousness, and maybe we sort of take religious "stabs" at trying to figure out what part God should have in our lives. A few years ago I spoke with a woman and mentioned a program on prayer we were planning to have at my church. She told me that over the years she had lost so many persons she loved to illness that she had decided to away from prayer altogether. She went on, "I suppose one needs to believe in something, but I can't say I believe in prayer at all." In her experience, prayer had let her down, a meaningful relationship with God seemed unattainable, too painful. So she was cut off. She had little hope in God. She needed release and hope. MANY folks in our world feel the same way.

"Be still and know that I am God." Be still. God can see the REAL you, the one underneath all the dark clouds and disappointments of your life. Be still. Hope is more than just a "way out" when there seems only confusion or crisis, it is a way of proceeding through the day-to-day of life. It is knowing that you're not alone. It is realizing that, no matter how hard you find it to love somebody, God still loves you. It is understanding that YOUR life is part of something larger than what you can see.

God went to Elijah in the time of his great need, fed and rested him, and then challenged him to get up and go. Jesus released the demon-possessed man in the Gentile land and told him to go home and tell folks what God had done for him. God can also meet us where we are, whoever we are, and release us into hopeful, purposeful living.

If we are bound, if we are hiding in fear, if we are sitting under a tree in life wishing our lives could be over...No matter what is going on in our lives, God is with us. God knows us, and God calls us to be still and know that we belong to God. Our lives are part of something larger than what we can define or see. God has the power to release us from whatever our "Something" so that we can live the abundant life Jesus came to give us. May this be so for each of us!

Let us pray: Dear God, we've heard how you cared for Elijah when he was running for his life, and how your power healed that man so filled with demons so long ago. We pray to know your presence and your power now. Some of us have wandered a long way, and wonder how to get back. Some of us have squandered our lives and wonder if they have lasting meaning. Some of us find ourselves overwhelmed by anxiety or pain. Please help us to hear your voice call our name. Help us to hear Christ telling us, "Come unto me, all you who labor, and I will give you rest." Help us to put our lives, the whole thing, into your hands; and help us to trust that you will give back just what we can handle. In Jesus' name. Amen.