

An Open and Inclusive Faith

sermon digest

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Matthew 8:18, 23-34

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Imaculee Ilibagiza's *Left to Tell: Discovering God amidst the Rwandan Holocaust* is an autobiographical account of human survival in the midst of one of the most abysmal moments in human history. As you would suspect, the author relives one horror story after another as neighbor inflicts heinous suffering upon neighbor, simply because the neighbor happened to be of the historic Tutsi tribe. Reflecting on the utter horror that surrounded her and her constant struggle against becoming submerged in overwhelming fear and despair, Ilibagiza utilizes the language of faith both to depict the strength that enabled her to endure and to provide a terminology appropriate to the inhumanity that seized the moment. Throughout her story she names the brutality and evil that surrounded her and the fear that threatened to engulf her very simply as "the devil."

Although our terminology might differ, Ilibagiza gives expression to a reality that is inescapable. We have seen too many occasions in history when fear and prejudice overpower human reason and simple human decency, unleashing a mob mentality that takes on a life of its own. "Demonic" is an apt description of the evil of the Rwandan genocide, Nazi Germany and the Darfurian tragedy today. A situation where fear feeds on fear brands those who are different as the enemy and thus "dispensable." Facing the long line of crosses that have been the means of obliterating offending heretics, rebels, tribes and races down through the ages, we're confronted by the inescapable question: "What do we do with our fears?"

Faith calls us to name and exorcize our demons. The world of the first century teemed with demons. They filled the very air that one breathed, entering the human body through the eyes, nose, lips and ears. The lifestyle of the wise and prudent was punctuated with amulets, magic, sacrifice, ritual and keeping oneself in places and among people known to be safe. Our scripture passage this morning depicts Jesus confronting and exorcizing demons.

Although we tend to speak of Jesus' calming the storm at sea as a "nature miracle," such a distinction does not fit the pre-scientific age of the first century. Common observations of the 21st century such as "*it rained*" or "*it was windy*," would have been out of place in a world where everything was controlled by the spirit world. God was the source of rain, wind and sun. Evil or demonic forces enjoyed a power of their own, directly in opposition to God and God's power. They had their own places of abode. They stalked desolate places, graveyards and most notably, the sea. Recalling the dark, foreboding, "formless face of the deep" over which the spirit of God moved in the beginning, dark and evil spirits moved in the waters still, sometimes whipping them into powerful storms. The depths of these desert dwellers' fear of water is reflected in the story of the Flood that threatened to return the world to the chaos that preceded creation. Conversely, trust in God was expressed as faith in the God who makes a way through the waters of Exodus and the recurring waters of life. God alone, the psalmist sings, rules the seas.

Jesus' calming of the sea is, then, an *epiphany*, an unveiling of who he is. Underneath the disciples' spoken question, "What sort of man is this, that even the winds and the sea obey him?" lies an unspoken response, "God is present in this man, for only God has this kind of power." In the telling of the story, there is also an epiphany of who the disciples are: "You of little faith!"

As if to bring the story home, the gospels turn then to the story of the healing of the Gerasene or Gadarene demoniac. In Matthew's story, there are two demoniacs; and in the sparse details of his story, the continuity of Jesus' confronting the demons of fear is starkly drawn. Rather than coming to rest as Mark and Luke do on the demoniac's appeal that Jesus accept him as a disciple, Matthew's story comes to rest on the townspeople. "The whole town came out to meet Jesus; and when they saw him, *they begged him to leave their neighborhood*" (34). What was going on here?

The picture we get as we piece together the gospel stories is that of a town that has put a lot of energy into the naming and containing of its demoniac(s). Do you want to know the name of evil? It was on the tip of every tongue. Do you want to know who to look out for? Just ask and you will be given specifics. Do you want to know where evil lurks? Just over there around those whitewashed tombs. And now this Jesus had messed it all up. He had exorcized the demons from the demoniacs, but the townspeople weren't about to let him turn his focus on them. "Better the devil we know," they said. "The devil that resides safely *out there* with '*them*.' *Those* are the demons we're willing to talk about. Leave our demons alone!"

The townspeople, Fred Craddock suggests, had met up with Jesus, counted the cost and found it to be too much [*Interpretation: Luke*, 117].

Faith calls us to walk toward our fears. Raymond Brown, a respected seminary professor of preaching, shared in a book some years back the experience of coming to grips with a serious heart condition. As he struggled with his illness and its serious implications for his life and livelihood, he came to a fundamental, life-changing conclusion. No matter how much he might wish other wise, his own emotional health and healing resided in his learning to walk toward rather than flee from his fears.

Faith calls us to confront rather than flee our fears. Jesus' reproach of his disciples grew out of his awareness

that the path ahead would strewn with challenge. Discipleship is about pilgrimage. It is about moving forward. It is not about becoming frozen in place at the prospect of challenge and change; and it is not about casting those who are challenging us and calling us forward as demons.

The church through the ages had had its martyrs, people of faith who refused to abandon faith for an easier, more agreeable path. It is also true, however that the church through the ages has devoured people of integrity who have refused to turn aside from the openness to the truth wherever they may meet it. This has been true in church as we have branded brothers and sisters of the faith as heretics; and it has been true as we have turned our backs on people of science, including even those scientists who are within the body of Christ.

Some thirty-five years ago in our first pastorate out of seminary, a young geneticist in our congregation in St. Louis spoke to us with appreciation about being for the first time in his life a part of a congregation that did not ask him to close himself off from his life's work when he entered the doors to the church. "I work with the principles of evolution in my work everyday. I see the process of evolution unfolding as I work in the lab." And yet everyday this young man, who had grown up in the home of a minister father, felt like he had to apologize or dissociate himself from his work in order to be accepted as a member of his faith community.

Faith that is healthy and strong is a faith that is open and inclusive. It does not hide from challenge. It does not demonize the challenger. It is patient and strong. It does not insist on its own way. Faith that is healthy and strong is on a lifelong journey of growth. It knows the God that it serves to be big enough and inclusive enough to not be threatened by any truth it may encounter.

Faith that is healthy and strong is a faith that knows wonder and awe. In the last century the world renown paleontologist and theologian Teilhard de Chardin did the world a favor as he brought science and faith together to learn from each other in exploring the mysteries of God and the universe. Commenting on his life's endeavor, he observed, "Less and less do I see any difference between research and adoration."

Francis Collins, director of the human genome project made a similar observation when he reflected on his awe at the prospect of mapping human genes. It was as if, he suggested, we were reading a language that no one had known before us but God.

Just this week the United Church of Christ released a Pastoral Letter entitled "New Voice Rising" in which it seeks to bridge the gulf between science and faith. The letter welcomes scientific advances in our time that "fill us with wonder and praise."

Through these gifts of science, we look across ever-expanding vistas of cosmic beauty, almost to the beginning of time itself. What we see evokes wonder and humility, and we hear within ourselves a new voice arising and singing an anthem of praise that reverberates through the whole of creation.

Barbara Brown Taylor's *The Luminous Web*, a small volume on science and religion, concludes with a parable. Recalling a Fourth of July fireworks display some years previously, she describes the people gathered to watch the show as dark silhouettes set against bright bursts of light. Each time a new explosion lit the sky, a small child carried on her father's shoulders a few feet away, lifted her tiny hand into the air, reaching for the sky.

Faith that is healthy and strong frees our children and frees us to reach for the sky. It does not put in place a glass ceiling beyond which we dare not go. It seeks to close down neither explorations into the mysteries of the universe nor into the mysteries of God. A faith that is healthy and free is a faith that is open and inclusive, inviting us to reach for the stars. Thanks be to God!