

Proper 7, Year C  
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The dark, murky water reveals a foreboding and ominous sight. A demon, barely visible by the night sky, grows in size, stretching its black, inky tendrils further out, grasping all life in its path. It shifts and morphs in shape, all the while expanding larger, wider, deeper. Those who gaze upon this beast are struck with primal fear, a concern for survival, worry for the masses. Men and women work tirelessly, attempting everything, *anything* they can think of to bind it, to shackle it, to control this wild force, but this demon is strong. It resists any attempts at bondage, breaking free, driven into the wild.

What a scary show! I saw this on television the other night, and its so popular they played it again, and again. I catch it on the internet and they even have radio broadcasts of it! The sad thing is, this is not a SciFi original movie.

This is the Gulf of Mexico.

It could have been the brainchild of a room full of creative script writers, but it's not. It's real...and *that* is scary. It's real that nearly one-million gallons of oil have been gushing up each day. It's real that this disaster has far surpassed the notorious Exxon-Valdez spill from 1989. It's real that we have created this situation in the world with our insatiable hunger for oil.

Similar to our gospel story today, the Garasene demoniac needs help. His picture is bleak, living in a tomb, naked, breaking free of all attempts to constrain him so that he might not run off into the wild again? One could imagine that the problem of the demon-plagued man has been a heavy burden for the town for a long time. Such a long time, perhaps, that to adjust to the disturbance has become so much easier than trying to fix the problem, to heal this poor man. They have become exhausted at their repeated and failed attempts, and to leave him out in the wild is a nice, simple, solution. Let him go! We're tired of chasing after him. Just let him go.

Oil is our demon, and like the Garasene towns folk, our attempts to fully contain this demon fail. We continue to ignore ecological warnings and drag our feet searching for sustainable energy alternatives. We have not had enough time with this oil spill yet, to feel the full impact of this tragedy, to realize the horrible implications. *It has* been two months to the day since the spill began, but the effects will linger forever. So far we have not found a solution, this "demon" has not been cured, and the oil continues to spread.

I wonder how tired the engineer is, wracking her brain in a crowded room, attempting to conjure up a plan to plug the oil hole. I wonder how tired the man on the clean-up crew is, as he picks up another oil-covered bird and meticulously washes its black-coated feathers. I wonder how tired we might become seeing all the miles of coast land doused, and hearing that the oncoming hurricane season may spread this spill even further. Like the townsfolk leaving the demoniac to himself in the wild, we might think we have the luxury of keeping the oil spill at a distance. Out of sight, out of mind. But we can't. As the spill creeps around the coasts of Florida we become even more aware that this is our problem too.

In the Gospel, the demoniac comes to join the crowd, to see what all the commotion is about. I believe there is a sense of guilt and shame that surfaces when the demoniac arrives on behalf of the towns folk because he represents our failure, an inky stain, the tar we can't seem to clean up ourselves. Our best

solution has been to essentially sweep him under the rug and hope that nobody notices, but we can no longer pretend that he isn't here. He's right here, plain as day, and his timing couldn't be worse because we have come out to meet Jesus. We feel ashamed that we didn't do something more to help him out, even though the task just seemed impossible.

Can we sweep this oil spill under the rug? Won't the oil spill show itself again in some way at a time that couldn't be more inconvenient? I can tell you what will not happen. Jesus standing on the banks, holding out his arms parting the waters of the entire gulf, and with simple, sweeping motions of his hands drawing out the oil and returning it to the earth. To think that will happen is just as believable as using golf balls to plug the hole. But Jesus does have the solution, Jesus IS the solution, and He is working through all of us to manage this disaster in many ways. It happens through the continued efforts of the president, BP's CEO, the work crews, the engineers. It happens through change. A change of heart, changing our minds, changing the way we have depended on oil for so long knowing the risks.

Jesus does not say, "I have come to restore things to the way they were," but instead Jesus says, "I have come to make things new." New means change. Jesus' presence in our lives demands that we change. When we look back at our Gospel story we realize that it would have been easier for the townsfolk to have sent the healed man back into the woods, or send him off with Jesus as he leaves. Yet Jesus sends him right back to the town, to us, right back in our midst, talking about this life-changing experience, proclaiming the good news and new life in Christ. We cannot escape this message now, and I wonder sometimes if the response of the townsfolk are not unlike our inner responses. "As long as we send Jesus away we do not need to face the changes that He demands of us." Similarly, "If the demoniac had moved away it would have been simpler on us, easier to ignore the effects Jesus has wrought."

But the healed man is with us, daily, even more so than when he would break free of his chains and run off. Even though the healed man is wearing normal clothes again the signs of his past, the scars on his wrists from those shackles, remain. He has not been restored by Jesus' healing, he has been made new, he has changed.

Jesus in our lives is change, divine change and it gives us a glimpse of the City of God, a heavenly realm compared to this familiar, earthly state. We are truly unaccustomed to this way of life, but Jesus as perfection is proof that we can at least make strides in the right direction, even if perfection is always too far away.

A common question in spiritual direction is, "Where is God in this situation?" Where is God in this oil spill? He is there, always, even in the worst case scenarios, even in the oil spills. Not as causer, not as punisher, but as the Almighty. Jesus too is with us, even today, in the efforts of all, in the concerns of the helpless, in the wisdom in a cry for help.

Jesus replaced the identity of the demoniac with a new identity. Now, the man in our midst stands as a permanent record of the power of Jesus, and in this way, Jesus never leaves. Jesus reminds us constantly, every time we see the healed man, every time we see the damage of the oil spill and the aftermath of its clean up, that we too must change...now. We must change, for an encounter with God among us can do nothing less than alter the paths of our lives forever. No other encounter claims such a tremendous hold on our spirits!

But our Gospel story serves also as a warning about change; it will not be easy. When Jesus healed the demoniac he sent the evil spirits into a herd of pigs who drowned in a lake. The people were scared.

They sent Jesus away. Our change will also come with difficulties. Will we suffer the inconvenience of carpooling to work? Should I start using a bike? Fishermen will suffer a loss, BP stock holders will suffer a loss, tourism will suffer a loss, the list goes on and on. Change is not simple, and often it is not invited.

The healed man wanted to stay with Jesus on His journey, but Jesus sent him away, saying, "Return to your home, and declare how much God has done for you." When we are divinely touched by the hand of Christ we become changed people, we are made new. Our duty becomes clearer, our works gain purpose, and our communion spans beyond our comprehension. Changed and new, we will return home. We will declare how much God has done for us. And when we do, we realize the power of Christ is always present.