

Pentecost 2-June 19, 2022

Baltic and East Nidaros Parish

Luke 8:26-39

“Holy Fear” Sermon by Pastor Randall J. Questad

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

Luther’s meaning to the First Commandment “You shall have no other gods” states that we are to **fear**, love and trust God above anything else. Did I say, Fear? Christians may find it easy to love and trust in God above anything else, but the thought of **fearing** God above anything else is not something we often think about or do. There are many things in this world that can cause us to be afraid. The uncertainty of transitioning to new jobs can be frightening. Scheduling an appointment with your physician is often avoided or postponed out of fear of what you may learn. We are afraid that summer will pass by too quickly if we are too busy and we are afraid it will fly by if we try to cram too many events into our summers. People are often afraid of beginning new relationships after others end in disappointment. When threatening weather forecasts are given, we have recently been reminded of the power of nature and rightly should respect this power and fear the loss of our homes, property, and lives. Children can have lasting fears simply by watching something scary on tv and then fear what they saw could happen to them. Christians usually don’t deny the presence and power of Satan in this world and know they are often targets of attacks from Satan, but of these things to be afraid of, believing we are to have no other gods also means that we are to **fear** God more than these other threats. This type of fear is often called having a “holy fear”.

There is a real presence of holy fear in this gospel reading where Jesus exorcized the many demons out of the man who had been spending his life among the dead and when he was seen in public, he was naked and bloody after breaking the shackles that were intended to bind him. This image of this demon possessed man is somewhat scary for us, but the people that were used to seeing him had become desensitized to his appearance and his actions. The people were no longer afraid of Legion. Their real fear emerged after they saw this man changed from what he was to someone completely new by Jesus. It wasn’t until the demons were drowned with the pigs and they saw this man sitting at the feet of Jesus listening to him that they were afraid. Their response to this fear was not to see more of what Jesus could do. Their response was to have Jesus leave town. These people were no longer afraid of the unholy but were afraid of Jesus who had more authority over demons.

Legion, the man who had many demons, feared the holiness and authority of Jesus as well. In fact, Legion knew the power of Jesus before the people witnessed what Jesus could do. Legion fell at the feet of Jesus and was afraid of what Jesus might do to him. Legion knew that Jesus came from God and had the power to either give life or put to death. Legion knew that Jesus had the keys to the kingdom of God and could either forgive sins or leave a person shackled in the guilt and shame of sin. Legion fell at the mercy of Jesus and the many demons begged him not to torment them further or to

send them back into living among the dead. Legion longed to have a new home, clothes to wear, and to finally set his mind at peace. And when Legion received all these things, the people were afraid. They had a fear of a holy God.

Having a holy fear is not a bad thing. This is often where faith begins. Without first knowing the power that Jesus has over evil, we might believe that Satan has the upper hand over Jesus. We also lack a holy fear of Jesus when we fail to recognize the difference between good and evil. Luther called people who confuse good and evil being theologians of glory. This was true in the days of Luther and Jesus and certainly is still true today when we no longer believe that when Jesus calls something evil, it is evil. When Jesus calls something good, it is good. Instead, we turn evil into something good especially if the evil thing is something we like to do. It seems strange that we can be outraged watching news stories about senseless school shootings, but never seem to be affected much by crime shows or movies that show similar gruesome acts of violence. This confusion between good and evil seems to be escalating or maybe different in our times, but it isn't new. I still find myself watching episodes of Gunsmoke and the Rifleman now, but I also remember watching them on tv when I came home from school as a pre-teen. I don't know if there is an episode of either of these westerns without shootings and several deaths. I also find myself watching episodes of Bewitched and laughing at them, but also realizing witchcraft is none other than the work of Satan. We have turned God into someone who is never to be feared and believe that he loves whatever we do. Without first having a holy fear of God, a god who is more powerful than Satan, we fail to fully love God who has the power to break the chains that Satan has on us and forgive our sins.

There are some vivid images in today's gospel reading of what living with Satan within you looks like and the violence that occurs when Satan is removed. Neither of these images are very peaceful. Having demons removed from a person and put into pigs that lose their minds and rush into the sea and drown is a frightening image. There are movies that depict what exorcisms might look like and again those that I have seen are violent and often frightening.

I went back and reread my approval interview essay which was one of my final steps in the candidacy process for becoming a pastor. When I sat down with the members of the committee to review my essay, they all had circled a paragraph where I described exorcisms that I had performed in the church. What I had written raised some questions with my interviewers until they gave me a chance for me to explain and for them to understand how pastors perform exorcisms today.

It may not have been the first thing that came to your mind when you listened to the exorcism that was performed on this man while listening to this reading today, but what happened to this man happens each time there is a baptism in our church. The demons were taken out of the man who received a new name, and they were drowned in the water, never to enter or have power over the man who now had a new life in Christ. The baptism liturgy that we use isn't written to scare the devil out of you, but that is what it does. The purpose of baptism is to save people through the water and God's word. In the liturgy, we hear how Noah, and his family were saved. But we should also remember that those who did not fear the power of the Lord perished in the flood. Before a baptism, we tell how God saved his people when the water of the Red Sea was parted, but it also was the Lord

who caused the sea to drown those the Lord chose not to save. Dr. Stephen Paulson uses a liturgy for baptisms that isn't as peaceful as the one I use. This liturgy commands the demons to come out of the new child of God and to never return. Regardless of what words we use in baptism, God forgives the sin of the newly baptized, delivers them from death and the devil, and gives everlasting salvation to the new believer. Baptism is none other than an exorcism.

The second reading for today from Galatians is a wonderful summary of what happened to this Gerasene demoniac after meeting Jesus. Before faith came, that is before this man heard from Jesus, he was imprisoned and placed under the law. This demon-possessed man feared that Jesus would be a disciplinarian. This demon possessed man knew that Jesus was more powerful than Satan and he feared him for that reason. However, this story does not begin with this man, nor does it begin with Satan. The gospel begins with Jesus. Jesus was the first to arrive and he waited for the right time and place to remove Satan and deliver faith to this man who was naked, homeless, and not in his right mind. It was this dramatic change in this man that caused others to have a holy fear in Jesus.

It was then that Jesus made one more interesting move. Instead of granting the new man's wish to follow Jesus by tagging along behind him, Jesus tells the new follower of Jesus to go home. After first having a holy fear of the Lord and then having faith take up residence where the law once lived, leads you to do something you cannot stop. You will declare to others what the Lord has done for you.

I invite you to pay close attention to the third verse of the hymn A Mighty Fortress is Our God that we will sing next. These words are just as true today as the day this hymn was written or when Jesus exorcized the legions of demons out of this man. There still are many devils throughout this land and they threaten to devour you. This could scare you, but we have nothing to fear, since God fights by our side and the devil has already been defeated. This is the love your Heavenly Father has for you. Amen