

So, when you think of biblical themes, you might think of forgiveness, kindness, compassion, resurrection or life after death.

You might think about feeding the hungry and housing the refugee.

If you are focused on the Old Testament, you might think of wandering in the wilderness or infertility or floods.

Some of you who are real Bible buffs might think about exorcism as a biblical theme, but I bet they wouldn't come to mind for most of us.

That's curious because a lot of exorcisms happen in the Bible, in both testaments.

I don't think we emphasize these scriptures because they make us uncomfortable.

I mean, who wants to think about demon possession and driving evil spirits out of one's body?

It might make you think of the movie the Exorcist, which conjures up images of Linda Blair's head spinning around 360 degrees.

This is literally the stuff horror movies are made of and we'd like to keep such things out of our church, thank you very much.

But the problem with ignoring the concept of exorcism is that you're then ignoring a not-insignificant part of the Bible.

And while it may be convenient to do that, to ignore the parts we don't like, I don't think it's very responsible.

So we're going to talk about exorcism and, I hope, detach it from any associations we make with horror movies.

You see, the man who had the evil spirit come out of him in today's story, he could have been any of us.

He was just a normal man, presumably faithful a Jewish man because he was in the Synagogue, just going to services on the Sabbath day, as you do.

But something that Jesus said that day in the Temple challenged something inside of him, and so, for some reason, he spoke up.

Could the man, perhaps, have heard something spoken, some truth, delivered to him?

Could Jesus have touched on something deep inside him, a part of his spirit that was unclean, that he needed to be delivered from?

There are parts of each of us that we don't want to look at, and maybe, just maybe, while that man was sitting in the Synagogue and listening to Jesus' teaching, Jesus poked at something that this man only wanted to ignore.

We all have pain and fears and worries and anxieties that we've repressed for years, the existence of those things is part of being human,

and the hiding of those things is what we do in order to cope and go about our daily lives so that they don't consume us.

But maybe the burden that man was carrying was bubbling to the surface, and whatever Jesus said caused him to not be able to contain it anymore, and so the man began to tremble.

I bet the people around him were terrified at the unusual sight, but the truth is that we are all that man.

We all carry burdens, but most of us, maybe all of us, don't want to be that open and that vulnerable with anyone.

We don't want to show our cards, but keeping them hidden is so exhausting and maybe this man was tired of hiding.

So instead of thinking of him as some demon-possessed man, we could think of him as just another flawed human, like the rest of us, but the difference is that he had the courage to reach out, and tell Jesus, "I need help."

We might forget this sacred truth sometimes, but Jesus came to oppose all the forces that keep the children of God from the abundant life God desires for all of us.

And that message matters because it is still the case: God wants the most for us from this life and stands in opposition to anything that robs us of the joy and community and purpose for which we were created.

Because much as we might try to hide our burdens, God already knows everything you've got, everything that has ever happened to you, and everything you are.

And despite what you may think of yourself, God loves you anyway.

And, every Sunday, God sees us sitting in the same pew that we sit in week after week and knows what we carry with us, even though we are really good at keeping those things hidden from ourselves and the rest of the world.

I imagine God hopes that we will finally give up those anxious pains, because you see, those things that rob us of that joy are part of us, but they don't define us.

Just like the man and the unclean spirit are one and the same in some ways, it is a part of him, it has the power to damage his psyche, his body, maybe his relationships, his ability to be productive or loving or happy.

But they are different, because the man is capable of living a healthy and whole life, without it.

It was taking up room in his mind, absorbing his mental energy.

It was taking up room in his body, perhaps causing lethargy and sickness.

And it was taking up room in his spirit, preventing him from connecting with God as a healthy, whole, person.

But whatever was eating him up inside, Jesus says, no more, it will no longer consume you.

And suddenly space was freed up in his mind, body and spirit and he could use that new room to make space for things that fulfilled him.

We all have feelings or memories that we need exorcised from our minds, bodies and spirits.

And by the way, the word exorcise, just means to get rid of something troubling, menacing or oppressive.

It doesn't necessarily have to do with spirits and demons, even though we've made a strong association between them.

But the point is that we all have these things inside of us and the rest of the world wants to leave us as we are, leave us broken, because then we constantly need to be fixed.

And when we need to be fixed, we spend money and energy on trying to fix those things inside ourselves rather than looking beyond ourselves to help others.

Keeping us convinced that we live in a constant state of disrepair is a way of controlling us, controlling how we spend our time, energy and money.

If I release myself of the burdens that I carry, the guilt over the wrong thing I said, or the shame over the missed opportunity to help someone, or the feeling of inadequacy, then I am free to serve God faithfully and to help others.

Jesus wants to equip us with the strength of faith so that things like shame, blame, guilt and fear have no power over us.

When Jesus strips the spirit of its ability to inhabit its human host, he is denying the unclean spirits' ability to have a settled place or entrenched influence in this world.

Losing opportunities to win over people's bodies and minds, those evil spirits, or negative, corrosive feelings that we have, they lose the authority they were thought to have.

This exorcism, then, does not eliminate evil and oppression and guilt and shame;

it only denies those kinds of forces the authority or power to hold ultimate sway over people's lives.

It's almost as if Jesus is inoculating us against those negative feelings and memories that we carry with us, those things that make us feel small and not good enough.

Whether its caused by an unhealthy family, or workaholism or affluenza or substance abuse or something else, we can all become possessed by unhealthy things which prevent us from living into the fullness of our beautiful, God-given identities.

God does not want these things for us.

Following Jesus and hearing the biblical stories and staying in community has the power to consistently remind us that we don't deserve to be weighed down by the burdens we carry with us, and we have the power, in relationship with Jesus Christ, to be released of them.

The good news is that none of us are alone in our struggles, for we all carry something with us.

But the church, at its best, is a place where we gather in Christ's name to support each other in escaping the hold these things have on us, that we might grow as individuals and a community as people blessed to be a blessing.

So rather than judging that man as someone scary who had a demon pulled out of him, we might think of him as someone who was just like us, but maybe a little more courageous.

A person of faith who went to the Temple on the Sabbath day and had the courage to tell Jesus, I need help.

There's no shame in admitting that we have those places of brokenness or disappointment or fear in our lives.

God does not stay away from us because of these challenges or shortcomings but rather, quite the opposite.

God draws nearest to us precisely in these moments and helps us become the healthiest versions of ourselves.

But the process starts with each of us having the faith and the wisdom to say, "I need help." Amen.