

Written for Sunday worship at the Chapel of the Resurrection | Valparaiso University,
Valparaiso, IN | 2nd Sunday after Pentecost | Jun 19, 2022

Reading: Luke 8:26-39

[William](#) was eleven years old when he first tried to run away. A man had knocked his mother off of a porch and then kicked her and kicked her – and William ran at the man and beat him with an ax handle.

Because William and his mother were slaves, and the man was their master, William knew he had to run for it. After spending some time on the Underground Railroad, William was captured and returned to his master, where he discovered that his mother and siblings had been sold away. Later, William himself was sold away. He made another run for freedom, but once again was caught and returned to slavery. It wasn't until the Civil War that he was finally and forever freed.

Today is [Juneteenth](#), a day to remember that other slaves had to wait even longer to be freed. 157 years ago today the ending of slavery was finally enforced in Texas, the last Confederate state to obey Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation. Slaves in Texas waited two and half years after the proclamation for the news to reach them and set them free. Slaves in two Union border states – Delaware and Kentucky – had to wait another six months for freedom to reach them with the passing of the 13th Amendment.

"Freedom isn't free," the saying goes. And freedom isn't easy, it isn't quick – and often it doesn't come without a struggle.

In [his autobiography](#), William tells another freedom story – the story of how God set him free in a spiritual sense. He writes about his anxious wrestling with his own sin, about the pull of God on his heart. It's a long, drawn out wrestling match. And then one day – near someplace called LaPorte, Indiana – William is overwhelmed by his struggle, and he is on the brink of giving up on life itself – when God comes through on God's promises of faithfulness. Simmons writes: "the great spirit of God whispered in my soul, 'woe be unto your damnation.'" He prays until he feels assured that his heart was held tight in God's hands.

"Woe be unto your damnation." I love that phrase – how it proclaims that God strikes fear into the hearts of our sin, our despair – that God strikes fear into the power of evil and all else that would keep us from God.

It's that fear of God that we see in the demons in today's Gospel story. Jesus comes to cast these evil spirits out, and they immediately cry out: "I beg you, do not torment me," *don't send us into the abyss*.

They know that they don't stand a chance. They're not putting up a fight – just trying to strike the best deal they can. Which ends up being moving into a herd of pigs and then running off of a cliff.

But the demons aren't the only characters in this story who tremble in fear at the power of Jesus.

After the demons are cast out – after the man is healed – the news starts to spread. People from the community make their way over to see it with their own eyes. And there he is: the man who for years had been living naked amid the tombs, who broke away when they tried to protect him, who was far beyond help – there he is. Wearing clothes. Sitting quietly. Listening to Jesus.

“And they were afraid.” The passage emphasizes this twice: “And they were afraid,” then – “they were seized with great fear.” After the miracle, the whole town begs Jesus to leave. *Why?* Why aren't they rejoicing, begging for more miracles, throwing a party for the man who has healed?

When I first started working here at Valpo, Pastor Jim had already figured out that I'm a bit of a comic book nerd. So he lent me a [comic book version of the Gospel of Mark](#), which is now one of my favorite books.

The comic includes this strange story of exorcism and pigs. In this interpretation of the story, the man with demons is himself afraid of Jesus; he tries to reject the healing Jesus offers. As Jesus opens his mouth to cast out the demons, the man tells him to stop. “They're mine,” he says. “They're me. Without them, I'm nothing.”

The man cannot imagine his life without his demons. He doesn't claim that they're a good thing, but he believes his life will only get worse without them. This is the way things have to be. This is the best he can do.

Maybe the people of his community feel that way. They don't like that this man is running around naked in a graveyard. They don't like that they've tried everything and still can't figure out how to help him. They know it's not good for him.

But on the other hand, this is the life they know. This is the situation they've figured out how to live with. And now some outsider comes through, and with just a few words, he's made this man an entirely different person. What kind of power does this stranger have? What's he going to do with it? He's already destroyed a whole herd of pigs – what other kind of chaos might he bring to their property, their people, their way of life?

Maybe these people are right to be afraid. God does not send the Holy Spirit to us to leave us the way we are. God does not send the Holy Spirit to the world to leave it the way it is. Woe be unto the way things are when Jesus comes to town.

Jesus says it himself in so many ways:

“The first shall be last, and the last shall be first” (Matt. 20:16).

“I have come to set the captives free and bind up the broken-hearted” (Luke 4:18-19).

“Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth” (Matt. 5:5).

And even, “I have come not to bring peace, but a sword” (Matt. 10:34).

This is a part of our discipleship that asks for our faith, for our trust in God. Our trust that the changes God is bringing to our world and our lives – even the hard ones – are changes for the better.

In the comic book Gospel, the man begs Jesus not to cast out his demons. “They’re mine. They’re me. Without them, I’m nothing.”

Jesus responds, “That’s not true. When they’re gone, you’ll still be here.”

“Promise?” asks the man.

Jesus affirms: “Promise.”

“Okay then.”

With that trust, the man can finally let go of his demons. Those powers of evil that have been destroying his life and his relationships, but that he has been clinging to in fear – he finally lets them go.

We often think of salvation as something that’s going to kick in for us after we die. But the story of this man and his demons reminds us: God also saves us here and now – by changing us, by changing the world around us. By telling us – it’s okay. We can let go of our demons. We can become the new person God is calling us to be. We can be part of God’s changes, God’s new creation – because we know who God is.