

Something has gone desperately wrong. There is great evil in our midst and we need to do something about it. Thoughts like this must surely have crossed the minds of Elijah and the Gerasenes.

The first solution for evil that Elijah came to was to kill the prophets of Baal that were, in his opinion, leading Ahab's Israel astray. Then he fled in fear to Judah and prepared himself to die. Fortunately, for Elijah and for us, God intervened.

Instead of a one-person solution focused on what appeared to be many sources of evil, the Gerasenes came up with a communal solution to evil that focused on what, in their opinion, was a source of evil in one man. But God intervened again.

Early last Sunday morning, one man killed 49 people at the Pulse Club in Orlando. Opinions are flying about what we need to do about the evil in our midst. Just as they did less than a year ago after the shooting deaths of nine people at Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church. Just as they did less than five years ago after the shooting deaths of 20 children and seven adults at Sandy Hook Elementary School. And just as they did less than ten years ago after the shooting deaths of 32 people at Virginia Tech.

"When will God intervene?" we cry or "Why we can't we stop this evil?" "What, then," the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King once asked, "is the answer to life's perplexing question, 'How can evil be cast out of our individual and collective lives?'"

Responses to Dr. King's question are seeded in this morning's readings. In our first reading, the prophet Elijah was zealous, maybe over-zealous, in his desire to do what he thought God wanted him to do. Elijah's violent actions rattled his sense of identity and stimulated a promise of violent retaliation, as so often happens. So Elijah, now a wanted outlaw, has gone to the wilderness to give himself up to God. Elijah expects to die, but God has other ideas.

After an angel saved his life, Elijah traveled for many days and nights to Mt. Horeb. There on the Mount of God, the word of the Lord came to him to say that YHWH was about to pass by. Elijah did not encounter God in the

mountain-splitting wind or in the earthquake or in the fire. Instead, Elijah finally noticed the presence of God in the opening of a space of sheer silence, where Elijah could finally hear the thin, still voice of God sending him to Damascus to be reunited with a community of 7,000 faithful Jews.

There is an intriguing parallel in more recent times. In the early days of the civil rights movement, Malcolm X had grown so outraged at the racism he had grown up with that he became a leading voice in a movement to secure justice and equality for black Americans. He proposed a revolution to cast off the shackles of racism "by any means necessary," including violence. Most of white America could not hear the voice of justice and freedom in the storm of violence that followed.

In 1964, Malcolm X made a hajj, which is the traditional Muslim pilgrimage to Mecca, where he converted to traditional Islam and changed his name to El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz. After his epiphany, he returned to States less angry and more optimistic about the prospects for peaceful resolution to America's race problems. He was shot to death in 1965, but his spiritual and political transformation had brought him closer to Dr. King's views.

As a result, more Americans began to listen to what Dr. King was saying. Over time, the still silent voice of God stirred the hearts of people who put their trust in God and opened their hearts and minds to Dr. King's passionate challenges. "How," Dr. King asked, "how can evil be cast out of our individual and collective lives?"

Luke's story of the demonic man has more seeds for a response to that question. The Gerasenes consigned a man to the tombs, chained up and naked. Perhaps he had done something that warranted being separated from other people. Maybe they even thought they were protecting him, but whatever the case, they did not want this man among them. In their collective opinion, this man could not be anything but a demoniac.

Now, if you and I were among the Gerasenes, we would experience our social structures as relatively tolerant, as most groups of people do. There were ways to deal with those who broke the rules and ways to reincorporate some rule-breakers back into good graces. But it would not occur to us to think of this man as anything but a demoniac.

Before Jesus showed up, we would have been in agreement about what holds our social order together. We would all have been participants in a closed system that depended on having a scape-goat. And we would all have participated in it without much thought, even the man possessed by demons. In fact, he participated in this scape-goating system for so long, either because of his isolation or actual mental illness, that he no longer had an identity. He was simply a scapegoat called “Legion.”

But in the presence of Jesus Christ, the embodiment of God’s justice, the demons became self-destructive, entered into a herd of pigs and drowned themselves. Part of the working assumption was that demons must have a place to be, whether it be inside a human or inside ritually impure animals or consigned to an eternal abyss. There is some wisdom in the assumption that evil exists and that it will continue to exist, so that we ask not “whether” evil exists, but “where.”

The still greater wisdom that Jesus evokes in this story is the deeply uncomfortable notion that evil may well lurk within each one of us and within the social structures that we participate in. And *that* is the evil that can elude our detection until someone from outside the structures like, say, some itinerant rabbi from across the Galilee, forces an encounter. The Gerasenes probably felt quite sensible in being seized with great fear and asking Jesus to leave.

Roman Catholic theologian Fr. James Alison has suggested that for Jesus to imply that the man may have been innocently acting out the scape-goating role handed to him would cause the people to resist strongly. After all, people in the privileged position of ownership had lost a potentially sizeable herd of pigs and the swineherds they hired had lost jobs. Liberating changes for many do come at a cost for some, but rather than celebrating Jesus returning the man to his own identity, the community responded with fear.

Now before we judge them, if you or I were one of the Gerasenes, Alison reminds us that “it would be inconceivable to [us] that [Jesus] was anything other than a troublemaker, someone who wanted to disturb order and subvert morality.”

Jesus did not fix the community. He left them bound by their own fear, *but* with a man who had been made whole—one witness to God's grace—planted in their midst. That *one* man's healed scars told a holy story that he could give to God like a sacrifice of incense so that God could use his renewed life to help make *others* whole.

You see, both Elijah and Gerasenes tried to do by themselves what can only be done in harmony with God. For you and me, that means clothing ourselves with Christ—making our lives into open receptacles into which God can freely pour grace. In Christ, Paul says, there is no longer slave *or* free. In Christ, not one of us is bound by fear and evil; and also not one of us is free to ignore our brothers and sisters. In Christ, we are slaves to no one and servants to all.

Through faith, we are all children of God and Abraham's offspring. Our faith frees us from the tyranny of our own opinions and opens our lives for God to work through us. The French philosopher Gabriel Marcel distinguished between faith and opinion in this way: Faith, Marcel claimed, is a belief *in* something, while opinion makes a claim *about* something. To have faith is not to believe *that*, but is to believe *in*. Placing our trust *in* God puts us at risk for being changed individually and collectively.

The more people put their trust in God, the more people God will fill with love, mutual respect, understanding and goodwill. Evil must never be met or countered with more evil or only evil will grow. Evil, however, *can* be cast out, Dr. King promised. "Evil can be cast out not by [people] alone nor by a dictatorial God who invades our lives, but when we open the door and invite God through Christ to enter."

God waits, speaking in the still silence, prepared once again to intervene, if we will open ourselves and listen.

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