

Gracious God, take our minds and think through them;
take our hands and work through them;
take our hearts and set them on fire.
Amen.

It is good to be back with you all here today. I am delighted to share that Vestry member Heather Albertson and I completed all the necessary work and reading, we passed the exam, and Friday evening we graduated from the College for Congregational Development. Check out the church Facebook page to see pictures from our week away.

Over the course of the last year – from our weeklong intensive last June through the second weeklong intensive we just completed – we have learned and practiced a LOT, including: learning core models for ministry, how to be change agents by planning for and implementing change, recognizing conflict and how to address it, how to gather and use feedback, personality types and how they interact with one another, understanding group needs and dynamics, and developing facilitation skills, to name just some of it. Did I mention it was intense?!

All of that is in service to congregational development, which is defined as the development of congregations of all sizes, locations, and conditions into more faithful, healthy, and effective communities of faith.

We have emerging plans for how we can share what we've learned in both big and small ways to help make St. James' a more faithful, healthy, and effective community of faith – so stay tuned, it will come up in conversation, in meetings, and even some parish-wide events.

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We are now in Ordinary Time – the long green season that takes up nearly half of the church year.

Often the color green evokes a sense of life, vitality, and growth – and indeed some call this the long, green, growing season – a time for us to grow deeper in ordinary faith week in and week out.

In this season, we get to spend a long stretch of time reading from one particular Gospel, and in the lectionary cycle, this year it's the Gospel of Luke. Today we pick up in chapter 8 of Luke, which contains a whirlwind of Jesus' teaching, preaching, and miracle working.

The story we just read, of Jesus healing the Geresene demoniac, offers a Christological narrative demonstrating that no one is beyond the reach of God's redeeming, healing love. And what's more, it tells us that salvation is holistic – bringing wholeness to body, mind, spirit, and relationships.

Jesus and the disciples crossed over and arrived opposite Galilee – that is to say, in Gentile territory. Immediately they were approached by a man filled with demons; Legion they said their name was, for they were many.

It can be hard for us to connect with a story like this today – we do not understand demons in the same way the people of Jesus' day did. But we can understand better when we look at what having demons meant for this man.

He was naked and had no home – living among the tombs. These were things that would have rendered him “unclean” and separated him from his community. At times he was so troubled that he was bound with chains. His experience was one of isolation and degradation – both of which are death-dealing forces.

So what are some of today's death-dealing forces – our modern demons? Perhaps things like the overwhelming nature of addiction, or the way anger can consume us; think of how our culture inspires envy which devours our sense of balance and gratitude; and also racism and misogyny and homophobia and all the forms of “othering” which seek to subjugate groups of people.

We may not call them demons, but they are demonic – because just like for the man in today's gospel, all of those things serve to separate us from God and others and our true selves.

Luke tells this story to emphasize God's power over the death-dealing forces of the world – lifting up healing and liberation as central to Jesus' mission.

That matters because in Luke, Jesus' repeatedly invites people to follow him in the work of salvation.

Now the word salvation comes from the Latin *salvus*, meaning health.

What this means for us, is that we are to follow Jesus into the tombs, so to speak, to bring health, wholeness, and restoration where there is isolation and separation.

So many challenges and possibilities arise when Jesus comes among us to call us to ourselves by calling us to himself.

And so the questions I hope you will pray about this week are:

How can we stand against the death-dealing forces we encounter in the world?

How are we helping to make whole that which has been pulled apart?

This long green season is not a time to lie fallow, but to push the roots of our faith down deeper that they may nourish faithful action in the world.

~ Amen ~