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Isaiah 65:1-9, Luke 8:26-33

The Rev. Alfred T.K. Zadig, Jr.

*Help us Jesus to be so connected to you
That we might become your disciples And the servants of others...*

*Take our lips and speak through them
Our minds and think through them
And take our hearts and set them on fire.*

Re-gathering! What a beautiful word. Seeing your faces, laughter, telling stories, with perhaps a few more gray hairs to boot! And to those gathering on live stream, welcome! We know you're here in spirit. The sweetness of the word regathering! And yes, there are so many exciting re-gathering plans to share with you, including a new Sunday rhythm that will feature multiple worship services in the morning, flowing into a series of outside late afternoon vespers services in what we're calling Podz (Parish Outreach Dedicated by Zipcodes), where we will re-gather by zipcode for back-yard worship face to face on Sunday nights!

But, lest I get ahead of myself, as we re-gather right now, let's take this word re-gather to another level as we gather those of you physically here with those of you online. I'm going to need each of you to help me bring Luke Chapter 8 alive. Yes, re-gathered, we're going to go to one of the scariest, darkest terrifying parts of the earth - the country of the Gerasenes on the Eastern shore of the Sea of Galilee. It's the story of the first exorcism in the Gospel of Luke.

To really understand and apply this story, I'm going to give each of you a role in Luke 8. In addition to all the swine, there are three sets of characters:

The Disciples, though they have a quiet role
A demon(s) possessed man
And a group of townsfolk...

For those of you watching this on-line, you are going to be the disciples. Those here on the South Side of the church, you're the demon possessed man. Don't take it personally, you're just role playing. And those on the North Side, you are the townsfolk.

Each of our characters have symptoms of what I'm calling today: the spiritual swine flu. I'm defining the Swine flu here as a "Perceived powerless-ness against evil-sin and hell." So, today the Spiritual Swine flu and its vaccination.

Okay, for those of you online, you are the disciples. Let me set your context. Jesus is pushing you disciples to the limits. You have just been through a scary storm on the Sea of Galilee, where Jesus calmed the seas and saved all of you from drowning. Right about now you're saying "Thank you, Jesus, let's head into the

yacht club for some dinner.” Hardly. Jesus wants to take you into MORE DANGER! He wants to change course heading into the terrifying country of the Gerasenes. As disciples you know the area is filled with pagans who worship Baal and sacrifice children and pigs, lots of swine. It was pagan, perverted, polluted, and anti-God. A no-go place for the Jews. As disciples, you’re muttering under your breath, “Classic Jesus, always running in while others are running out.” As you approach this dark, scary place, your fear level hits the roof, as you can’t believe what you hear, see, and smell.

As your boat makes the final approach, it’s what you disciples hear...the terrifying sounds of a man screaming evil epithets. Swearing, cursing, groaning, you can’t make out a face, but his screechy voice sends shivers up your spine.

As you get closer, it’s what you disciples see. You begin to make out the coastline with dark cave-like tombs - endless caves of the dead. But then, the terrifying sight of a man frothing at the mouth! Not just frothing, but totally naked as well! You can make out all the wounds from the chains that had held him. Not just wounds, but open sores. Terrifying.

As your boat gets closer, it’s what you disciples smell of this naked man. Unbathed flesh, the worst b-o you’ve ever experienced. You’re frozen in fear.

And that my friends, is the first symptom of the swine flu...fearful helpless paralysis. You have it in spades.

Okay, shifting characters now. To those of you on the south side of the Sanctuary, you are the demon possessed man himself. You are the ugliest sight many have ever seen. Your arms and legs are ringed with concentric layers of scar tissue, the result of those chains that you burst out of. You live in complete isolation among the dead. Since getting out of the chains that held you, you have been cutting yourself and now are simply a bloody mess. You’re also a bloody mess psychologically. You are, in today’s language, part of the cancelled culture. People have given up on you. You are possessed by demons, living with no hope. As the demon possessed man, all you can think is this, “I’m too far gone to be saved. I’m a lost cause.”

Spiritual Swine Flu Symptoms:

Disciples at home - paralyzed in fear

Demon possessed man south side - I’m too far gone

Okay, before we get to the townsfolk and our north aisle, there is another character here that frankly I didn’t want to give to anyone. It’s just too dark. I’m talking about the demons themselves. Historically and Biblically, demons are the mouthpieces of evil. They are real. The Bible tells us that demons are fallen angels who joined Satan in his rebellion against God and were cast out of heaven along with Satan in Revelation 12, where they now live on earth. Today, demons continue to serve the devil in his attempt to lead people away from God and into sin. These demons entered that poor man.

But as the boat of you disciples with Jesus approaches, these demons cry out of the man, “Jesus, don’t torture us.” Jesus calmly says, “What is your name?” They yell out “Legion” meaning many. Then in the first exorcism in the Gospel of Luke, Jesus casts the demons out of the man and into the local pigs, the local swine. Once in the pigs, they sprint into the Sea of Galilee and drown. What a scene to visualize!

Demons are as real today as they were then. They are hot with rage trying to take people away from Jesus Christ, hot with rage because they know their time is short and that they will ultimately be thrown into the eternal fire with Satan.

Back to our characters with the Spiritual Swine flu:

Disciples at home - paralyzed in fear

The cancelled demon-possessed man - I’m too far gone

And now to those on the north aisle: the perplexed townfolk. You had no idea about this exorcism. You live in town and are baking bread when you hear commotion in the street. People are yelling, “The crazy man down by the lake, he’s no longer crazy! He’s dressed with clothes on, speaking wisdom and is completely cured!” And your response? Total shock! What you see with your eyes can hardly be believed. It’s true. The crazed and naked lunatic is now clothed and sitting calmly on a rock at the feet of Jesus, whom you had never seen before.

But then you look into the lake below and there you see 2,000 pig corpses bobbing in the Sea of Galilee. Your shock turns to rage. Why? Two reasons. You had been one of the people who had tried taming this very man with whips, chains, pagan gods, and every bit of medication you could find. It never worked. What power did Jesus have that we don’t?

But then you in the North Aisle, you see all those the dead swine and your eyes burn with anger! Pigs equal one very simple thing...money. This Jesus crashed your economy! Dow stock exchange plunges! These pigs in your farming town represent your economic survival. As the pigs drown so does your wallet! You are enraged. You don’t care that a miracle has happened. You’ve lost your possessions.

Another symptom of the swine flu: powerlessness against evil. And missing out on the supernatural because your eyes are on your possessions.

THE SPIRITUAL SWINE FLU:

You at home as disciples - Living the Spiritual Swine flu from a paralysis of fear. The kind of fear that hits your solar plexus, the kind of fear you experience when you come face to face with evil. Have you ever experienced that kind of fearful paralysis?

You on the south side - as a demon possessed man living the spiritual swine flu through the firm belief that you could never be saved. Have you ever said that, felt that? You’re in a financial mess. Your marriage is in shambles. Your job is shaky. You’ve convinced yourself that not even Jesus himself has the power to save you. Let me ask you, could your current situation be any worse than the perilous mess of the demon possessed-canceled man?

Okay, You north side townfolk, your Spiritual Swine Flu is a perceived powerlessness against evil, and missing out because your eyes are on your stuff! You feel no authority over evil. From another perspective. faith is fine as long as it doesn’t disturb the inner workings of life. As long as it doesn’t disturb my pocket book. As long as it doesn’t disturb my possessions. As long as it doesn’t disturb my nice and polite belief system I’ve had from childhood. Jesus I appreciate you, but don’t demand anything of me.

I have good news for you. Jesus is the cure for the swine flu! He is our vaccination. You see in this exorcism, Jesus doesn’t point beyond himself for a cure to the swine flu. He is the cure for our swine flu. Jesus is able to deliver us from analysis paralysis! Jesus is willing to meet us wherever we are. He goes in as others flee. Unlike the disciples frozen in fear on the boat, Jesus steps out of the boat and confronts the situation with no fear. Jesus risks everything to save just that one man that no one else could. The essential heart of Jesus reveals there is no place he won’t go. And even more beautiful, no one, no situation, or no relationship is too far gone, too cancelled, to be saved. No background is too checked for Jesus to redeem! Once saved by Christ, we are no longer a slave to our past, our sin, our struggles! We are redeemed to become more like Jesus. It’s never too late.

It gets even better, Jesus calls evil for what it is and casts it out. And because He has that power, we do too. By the end of the Gospel of Luke, it would be Jesus who would be driven into the tombs. The chains on the demoniac would be put on Jesus in the crucifixion on the cross. Essentially, Jesus and the demon possessed man change places. The crying and bleeding of the man, would turn into the cries and the bleeding of Jesus. The result? Jesus died on the cross to wipe out evil, without wiping us out! Jesus died on the cross to give us power and authority over sin and evil. Jesus dies on the cross to absorb that evil in each of us, giving us the power to cast evil out.

In fact, later in Luke, Jesus says, “I have given you authority to tread on serpents, scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy, and nothing will hurt you!” The ultimate vaccination over evil! Evil is defeated when we realize because of what Jesus did on the cross, we have the authority over evil today to say. “Satan, demons, in the name of Jesus Christ...BE GONE.”

That’s the vaccination. This is not crazy or radical, it is straightforward Biblical Christianity! We use this vaccination at every Baptism. In fact, we said it this morning when we re-gathered at a baptism in our churchyard! Laura and Michael, do you renounce Satan and all the spiritual forces of wickedness? I DO. Do you renounce the evil powers of this world? I DO. Do you renounce your sinful desires that draw you away from God? I DO. That’s our vaccination. Are we using it?

Finally, this morning, if you had the vaccination for Covid-19, would you just discreetly keep it to yourself? NO! Back to those of you on the south side, you that were formally demon possessed. After you are healed, Jesus says what? Go! Give your testimony! Start with your family, your children, your neighbors. Every one of them. Do not keep the vaccine a secret! Tell your story, night and day.

Here’s the miracle within the miracle. Several months later, Jesus would return to the country of the Gerasenes for the re-gathering of all re-gatherings! Three days of teachings by Jesus! According to Mark 8, thousands of pagans, non-Jews show up. So many come that Jesus produces another miracle, the feeding of the 4,000 to feed them all! But, how do the pagans know to re-gather? Many believe it was because the former demon possessed man had invited everyone! He made it his business to evangelize and regather the people to receive Jesus! How do we know? Mark 5: The healed man went away and began to proclaim in that region how much Jesus had done for him, and everyone marveled.

My friends, let’s re-gather, and not just with our parish! But with our neighbors, our city, our zipcodes. With those who know and don’t know Christ. Re-gathering to tell the world with confidence, we have the vaccine for evil! The vaccine that reverses our fearful paralysis. The vaccine that tells us, we are not too far gone! The vaccine that defeats evil. The vaccine that places our priority of Jesus first in all things, even before possessions. Let’s re-gather like never before!