

**Luke 9:37-43 “Facing our Demons” Rev. Janet Chapman 3/2/25**

**There once was an older couple who had just entered a nursing home together. The wife, unfortunately, was in the early stages of Alzheimer’s and her husband was seeking a supportive environment for the two of them to walk this difficult journey together. As the wife steadily began to lose touch with reality, it became apparent they could no longer safely remain in their home. Their minister came to visit their new location and the first thing the wife shared was she was deeply concerned that her husband was declining quickly. Both the husband and the pastor were surprised at her assessment. The wife continued with a huge sigh, “Pastor, if he continues like this, I guess we’ll just have to put him in a nursing home.” In a compassionate tone, the husband corrected, “But, honey, we are in a nursing home.” She looked at the minister, winked, and said, “You see what I mean?”**

**Losing touch with reality comes in a variety of ways these days, individually and globally. In our scripture today, a child is brought by his father to Jesus because a demon has caused his child to lose touch with reality. These days, we understand such demons to be connected to medical, spiritual, and/or psychological imbalances. The poor kid was probably suffering from epilepsy or some kind of dissociative disorder, Tourette’s syndrome, maybe a brain tumor. Most would say he didn’t need an exorcist; he needed a good neurological consult and a treatment plan. Maybe, but to read this story scientifically strikes me as profoundly unimaginative. The demons have taken control of this boy’s life and he is in psychological and social chains. We may not call them demons anymore, but I know plenty of unholy spirits that separate an**

individual or group from the Really Real life that God has created. The Really Real is a step closer to God even than reality, because it is defined by God's standards not human standards. Right before Jesus' encounter with the demon-possessed boy, Jesus and 3 disciples met the Really Real in the appearance of Moses and Elijah on the mountain while Jesus was praying. We call it the Transfiguration story and it is found in Matthew, Mark, & Luke. The disciples witnessed Moses and Elijah talking to Jesus about his departure, which he was about to accomplish in Jerusalem. Peter wanted to build some dwellings to enclose the Really Real, to box the experience up so it could be honored and worshipped, but quickly found out that wasn't how it works. Brilliant, glorious light shone all around them and they heard a voice from a cloud say, "This is my Son, my Chosen, listen to him!" Once the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone once more.

Barbara Brown Taylor notes there is subtle genius in Luke's storytelling in chapter 9 as we don't come to the story about the demon-possessed boy completely cold. It is right after this Transfiguration story, where the disciples have just gotten a full dose of God's spooky, liberating glory, a face-to-face experience with the Really Real. Having encountered the Really Real, both in the glorious Light and in the Son to whom God has commanded us to listen, it seems we are better equipped to recognize the unholy, the unrealistic, the disconnected spirit making the poor boy unrecognizable to his own father. According to Luke, the boy is also an only child. The father says, "Teacher, I beg you to look at my son; he is my only child." Thus, we have two only sons operating under the influence of

two different spirits – one spirit in the lifesaving business and the other spirit in the bondage business. Bringing them face-to-face like this, right after what happened on the mountain, Luke is expecting us to be able to tell the spirits apart. He also expects us to know which one is more Real. Additionally, compared to other exorcisms of Jesus' time – and there were plenty – this story reveals that Jesus of Nazareth was a minimalist. When he dealt with demons, he didn't make use of charms or amulets; he didn't cast spells or go into some kind of trance. He didn't lean over the body of the possessed person and make weird sounds while he did things that he made sure no one else could see. He simply commanded the unclean spirits to get lost and they did – sometimes quietly, sometimes quite loudly – but still, the unclean spirits did what Jesus told them to do. In the reality of his presence, their so-called reality was exposed for what it was: parasitic, dependent, abusive, greedy, power-hungry... and over. A word from him was all it took to send them packing.

In this case, Jesus wasn't the first person the father asked to free his child from the destructive spirit. He says, "I begged your disciples to cast it out, but they couldn't." But the disciples aren't yet transformed enough to deal with it. Jesus is frustrated with their lack of understanding, their lack of transfiguration, that is their lack of figuring out who he is and what message he has to offer. It could be argued that Jesus could say the same to us today, especially as the destructiveness of Christian nationalism seizes control of churches nation-wide. Jesus' indictment of the faith of the disciples, "You faithless and perverse generation" speaks to any who make people more and more afraid of each other by telling them that the demons

are all out there- banging on their doors, trying to take what is ours – and that anyone who believes differently is clearly working for the other side. “You faithless and perverse generation” is shouted at those who make others work longer and longer hours at jobs that never get done by persuading them that terrible things will happen to them and those they love if they don’t make enough bricks to see them through a menacing future. “You faithless and perverse generation” is whispered in the ears of those who make people eat what will not nourish them and buy what they cannot afford, by convincing them that these things will fulfill them, when all that is filled are the pockets of those who care nothing about them but how much they can consume. Our world is dashing the poor against the rocks of despair, hunger, and abandonment everyday. The Christian nationalistic beast which is controlled by a few demons is making our people convulse day and night. The homeless, the immigrant, the incarcerated, the government worker, the transperson, the people of Ukraine and Gaza, parents who work 3 jobs just to feed their kids... they are all like that boy, thrown into the shadows of our society, convulsing day and night right in front of us. And some of us, who seem to not know anything about the transfiguration of Jesus, or our own metamorphoses because of our naming of Jesus as Messiah, are looking at these people while asking Jesus: “Can we just build some dwellings to isolate the Really Real on our own terms, to bask in your glory, far away from these people with all their pressing needs?” Jesus says, “You faithless and perverse generation, how much longer must I be with you and bear with you?”

The good news here is that apparently Jesus thinks there is hope for us, he believes his disciples should be able to do this work. Those who have encountered the Really Real, who have had that glorious Light rub off on them, should not be flummoxed by a simple convulsing demon. It's true that glimpses of the Really Real are few and far between, but it only takes a brief moment to experience that Sacred Presence face-to-face and know that it is one step closer to God than what we define as real... it's in the grasp of a newborn baby's hand, it's in the brilliant sunrise after a terrifying storm, it's in the touch of a beloved's hand when disease pulls the mind away, it's in the steady breathing of a loved one whose life had been in jeopardy. However, if we don't get out of the fortress of our isolated dwellings, if we don't rebuke the unclean spirits of the powers that be, if we don't shed the Light that has rubbed off on us onto the lives of the oppressed, we will never know what transfiguration means, let alone be able to face our demons.

A story is told about a minister who once came out of his office laughing and a friend asked, "What's so funny?" He answered her, "What God just said." The friend responded, "That was funny?" "Yeah... I was just doing my usual begging, asking God to make me a better person, to look after Gran, to help Stephen through his surgery, be by his side after the procedure, when these words came into my head, clear as anything." "What words?" she asked. "Well, I think God just said: "Don't ask me to do anything that you can do for yourself." The good news is that Christ believes we can do this work, at least if we work together, in community as we were created to be. And we know an exorcist of sorts who can rebuke the unholy,

**someone whose reality is so strong and his intimacy with the Really Real is so great, that in our connection to Christ, we are transfigured. Christ can restore us to our senses so we can choose our own lives again, once we are free from the imposters who will never stop trying to take God's place. As we begin a 40-day Lenten journey, minus the Sundays, to Jerusalem and the holiest week of the year, then we are going to need to face a few demons, in us and around us. Because of Christ and what is Really Real, we have nothing to fear from them. God is great, all the time and all the time, God is great! Because you were created by God, deep down your spirit recognizes what is Real, and you have a Savior near at hand. One word from Him is all it takes.**