

**St. Luke the Physician Sunday**  
**October 17, 1999**  
**Trinity Lutheran Church**

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I Kings 17:17-24

*17 After this the son of the woman, the mistress of the house, became ill; his illness was so severe that there was no breath left in him. 18 She then said to Elijah, "What have you against me, O man of God? You have come to me to bring my sin to remembrance, and to cause the death of my son!" 19 But he said to her, "Give me your son." He took him from her bosom, carried him up into the upper chamber where he was lodging, and laid him on his own bed. 20 He cried out to the LORD, "O LORD my God, have you brought calamity even upon the widow with whom I am staying, by killing her son?" 21 Then he stretched himself upon the child three times, and cried out to the LORD, "O LORD my God, let this child's life come into him again." 22 The LORD listened to the voice of Elijah; the life of the child came into him again, and he revived. 23 Elijah took the child, brought him down from the upper chamber into the house, and gave him to his mother; then Elijah said, "See, your son is alive." 24 So the woman said to Elijah, "Now I know that you are a man of God, and that the word of the LORD in your mouth is truth."*

Acts 3: 1-10

*One day Peter and John were going up to the temple at the hour of prayer, at three o'clock in the afternoon. 2 And a man lame from birth was being carried in. People would lay him daily at the gate of the temple called the Beautiful Gate so that he could ask for alms from those entering the temple. 3 When he saw Peter and John about to go into the temple, he asked them for alms. 4 Peter looked intently at him, as did John, and said, "Look at us." 5 And he fixed his attention on them, expecting to receive something from them. 6 But Peter said, "I have no silver or gold, but what I have I give you; in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, stand up and walk." 7 And he took him by the right hand and raised him up; and immediately his feet and ankles were made strong. 8 Jumping up, he stood and began to walk, and he entered the temple with them, walking and leaping and praising God. 9 All the people saw him walking and praising God, 10 and they recognized him as the one who used to sit and ask for alms at the Beautiful Gate of the temple; and they were filled with wonder and amazement at what had happened to him.*

Mark 5: 1-20

*They came to the other side of the sea, to the country of the Gerasenes. And when he had stepped out of the boat, immediately a man out of the tombs with an unclean spirit met him. He lived among the tombs; and no one could restrain him any more, even with a chain; for he had often been restrained with shackles and chains, but the chains he wrenched apart, and the shackles he broke in pieces; and no one had the strength to subdue him. Night and day among the tombs and on the mountains he was always howling and bruising himself with stones. When he saw Jesus from a distance, he ran and bowed down before him; and he shouted at the top of his voice, "What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I adjure you by God, do*

*not torment me." For he had said to him, "Come out of the man, you unclean spirit!" Then Jesus asked him, "What is your name?" He replied, "My name is Legion; for we are many." He begged him earnestly not to send them out of the country. Now there on the hillside a great herd of swine was feeding; and the unclean spirits begged him, "Send us into the swine; let us enter them." So he gave them permission. And the unclean spirits came out and entered the swine; and the herd, numbering about two thousand, rushed down the steep bank into the sea, and were drowned in the sea. The swineherds ran off and told it in the city and in the country. Then people came to see what it was that had happened. They came to Jesus and saw the demoniac sitting there, clothed and in his right mind, the very man who had had the legion; and they were afraid. Those who had seen what had happened to the demoniac and to the swine reported it. Then they began to beg Jesus to leave their neighborhood. As he was getting into the boat, the man who had been possessed by demons begged him that he might be with him. But Jesus refused, and said to him, "Go home to your friends, and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and what mercy he has shown you." And he went away and began to proclaim in the Decapolis how much Jesus had done for him; and everyone was amazed.*

I guess there is hardly anything any of us value more than our health. When we get sick, even if it's just with the sniffles or a headache, one of those days when we say we're "under the weather," it's hard to take much enjoyment in life. And major illnesses really scare us. They can change our lives, they can prevent us from working or doing the things that give us pleasure. Really bad illnesses can leave us dependent on others, unable to take care of ourselves. They can totally bankrupt us. And they can end our lives altogether.

It's really awesome how much time and energy we spend on health and health care issues, trying to get medical insurance and then trying to get our insurance to pay when we need some sort of test or treatment, trying to find the right doctor, getting prescriptions filled and then keeping track of the pills we need to take each day, and I know that for some of you those are just piles of pills to keep track of. Life is such a great gift when it's working well for us. When we are sick or ailing or just declining as we get older, life can become a struggle, almost a burden. And yet, pretty generally most of us want our lives to continue, even when our lives are filled with pain, suffering, anxiety, depression. In his film *Annie Hall*, Woody Allen described life as "divided up into the horrible and the miserable," but even if that's the way we experience life, we pretty much don't want to give it up.

So it's no wonder that the religions of the world have had a lot to say about health and sickness. Any of you who have visited Japan will probably have seen the prayer requests written on little tablets and pinned outside the temples everywhere. Prayers for passing exams, for finding jobs, but, most of all, for health and healing. Think of how prominent are requests for health and healing in our prayers each Sunday here at Trinity. And as we get older, don't we begin to check each morning, "Ah, yes, thank you, God, I'm still here. I'm still breathing. Now let's see if I can get myself out of bed."

The Bible has lots of stories about healing, usually dramatic, instant, almost magical healings, as the three readings today illustrate. In this strange, quaint story in Mark's gospel, Jesus comes across as one of those wonder-workers that were popular in the Mediterranean world of Jesus' day, magicians who made a stir by the miracles they could perform. Jesus wasn't the only one. It seems as though people were looking for miracle men, who could perform instant cures, just as so-called faith-healers attract a following today. So Jesus is pictured here like one of those ancient wonder-workers.

He just gets off the boat when he is accosted by someone who is wild and deeply disturbed, someone who's been holing up in among the tombs at the local cemetery, scaring everyone who comes upon him with his violent behavior and crazy talk. Night and day, Mark writes, he is howling and bruising himself with stones. Today we would diagnose this person as suffering from a serious mental illness, and he would probably be treated with anti-psychotic medication. But Jesus, of course, lived in ancient times, long before the discoveries of modern science, which have changed our understandings of everything, and so the people of his day and probably Jesus himself interpreted this poor man's condition as the result of possession by what is called an "unclean spirit" or even many spirits, spirits that "possessed" the man and controlled his speech and behavior, much as we today would think of a disorder in a person's brain chemistry controlling the person's feelings, speech, and behavior. While they thought of his problem as possession by an outside force of some kind, we would think of it as an internal physical and mental malfunction.

In our story Jesus "permits" these many spirits to exit the troubled man and take up a new lodging in a nearby herd of pigs. The pigs then run amok, rushing down the bank into the sea, where they drown—not a happy turn of events either for the pigs or for their owner.

Actually I've never been able to figure why this would have been a good deal for the unclean spirits either. What would be the value of possessing a herd of pigs, who then drown themselves? What were the spirits supposed to do then? Hang out in a bunch of dead pigs at the bottom of the sea? That wouldn't seem to me to be very promising. Or were the pigs just transitional objects on the way to more interesting prey?

Well, whatever we may think of the spirits and the unlucky pigs, the man—now that he has been liberated from the forces that were destroying him—acts normal again: he sits down instead of running around out of control; he is clothed again instead of tearing all the clothes off his body; he thinks and talks rationally. He is returned to normal life, much as anti-psychotic medications have helped many people today to reassume normal lives, sometimes after years of terror and torment. Jesus tells him to go home and tell his friends what God had done for him, what compassion God had showed to him.

I'm emphasizing the differences between the way the Bible interprets illness and the way we interpret illness today. And I'm doing that because, even though we today share some of the same worries as the people of the ancient world did (We worry about our health. We worry about dying.), when we get sick or when we die, we are aware today, as the pre-modern, pre-scientific

people of the ancient world were not, of how disease and death come from totally natural causes. We know about viruses and bacteria. We know about body chemistry. We know about how the various organs work and why they stop working. And, besides that, we're aware of how modern science has come up with all kinds of ways to kill off the viruses and bacteria and to keep organs working past their time and to treat anxiety and depression and psychosis with medications and to solve really complicated health problems that in the ancient world were simply great mysteries people thought were caused by malevolent gods or demons.

We do not live in a demon-haunted world. We are not threatened by evil, malevolent spirits. Despite the fantasies that find their way into gothic novels, horror movies, and TV sitcoms, there is really no scientific reason to believe that spirits—clean or unclean—, demons, poltergeists, omens, aliens, ghosts, beasties, or things that go bump in the night are lurking around waiting to get us. And that's really lucky for us, because we have plenty of real, concrete, dangers to worry about, like the zillions of chemicals that seem to promote cancer, like cigarette smoke and drunk drivers, and the stress of our pressured lives, and lots of other threats that we read about in papers and magazines every day. Thank goodness we don't have to add on demons too!

But these Bible stories about Elijah and the apostles and Jesus himself were written at a time when people did experience their world as haunted, possessed by mysterious forces they couldn't understand and that were wholly beyond their control. They thought of God directly intervening to give life and to take it away. If anyone survived a serious illness, they thought God had directly stepped in to save the sick from otherwise certain death. We read those stories and we may think it works that way for us too.

But I have to confess that I have a problem with that. And it's not just that the idea of God directly intervening in our lives is really a pre-modern way of thinking about things. That is a problem. But I think the even bigger problem is that it's hard to figure out why God would step in to save some sick people and not others. It seems unfair, unjust, and cruel for God to fix one suffering child and not the one in the hospital bed next door. It doesn't fit with an unconditionally loving God that God would seem to allow one person to suffer horribly and then die, while God makes another person get better and restores that person to full health. "Why does God do that?" we ask. People have lost their faith in God altogether after they've prayed with all the trust and earnestness they could muster for a beloved parent or sibling or spouse or for their innocent little child and the one they've prayed for just continues to fail and finally dies. If God really does keep intervening directly all the time to save one person, while letting another person suffer and die, how can we imagine such a god to be good, just, and caring?

So I think it works differently than that. I think that God is somehow in, with, and under the whole creation, providing its foundation, setting its direction, enabling its very being. We all agree that God has built into the creation the stuff of life, of *shalom*—the Bible's word for health and wholeness and peace. And that stuff of life, that *shalom* is fully present in the world in a wholly natural way. Over the course of millions of years of evolution, the creation, the whole cosmos, has become a wonderfully rich, beautiful complex system of galaxies, stars, planets, and an earth teeming with millions of species of plants and animals, yet related to one another in such

a way that the needs of every species are met. Into this kind of world that has emerged from the evolutionary process you and I were born and live and finally die. Along the way we experience joy and suffering, pleasure and pain, health and illness. They are all elements of the life that God's creative impulse and the evolutionary process have bequeathed to us.

But through it all, this God, who is in, with, and under every tiny speck of existence, remains close to each of us, supporting and sustaining us in sickness and in health, for better or for worse, for richer or for poorer, our whole life long. When we pray to God, we consciously draw on God's strength that sustains the cosmos and provides for our every breath. When we do that, get in touch with the God who is the source of our being and the strength underlying our life, we gain courage, our trust and hope builds, and we are better equipped within ourselves to heal from whatever problem threatens us. It's all very natural. And even so it is a powerful comfort and support for us.

So when we perform a ritual of healing in a few minutes and those who wish to do so come forward and are touched and hear ritual words said over them, we are not engaging in ancient magic or medieval hocus-pocus. We are acting out our trust in God to see us through everything we meet along life's journey, to be near to sustain us when our bodies tremble and fail or when our minds are burdened or when our heart is deeply troubled. And by speaking God's name and touching one another with God's compassion, we fortify ourselves for every challenge, knowing that, however the changes and chances of life may affect us, we will be safe in God. It's not magic, but it's still wonderful, that when we feel ourselves touched by God's compassion, we too, like the tormented person in our gospel story today, discover we can sit in calmness, clothed in safety, and with our minds at rest, knowing God has done all that is possible for us. And, yes, even in a modern, scientific age, we can continue to be filled with wonder and amazement at the presence of God's compassionate care .