

“Prince of Peace”

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It would be hard to create a story with more misery...or more peace...than this one.

Isaiah 9:6-7; Luke 8:26-38

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Deviled ham

If it seems odd that we chose the Scripture about Jesus sending the demons into the pigs for the Sunday before Christmas, I have a ready explanation. Last week I talked about the different origins of Christmas traditions – Santa Claus and Christmas trees, for example. If you join us tomorrow night for one of the Christmas Eve services, I’m going to give you the story behind arguably the most famous Christmas carol, Silent Night.

It was Chris Matthews, one of our missionaries, who suggested at Bible study Thursday morning the connection between Christmas and Luke 8’s story of Jesus, the demoniac, and the pigs. This is why the primary meat on the table Tuesday will be “Christmas Ham.” If you thought that was bad, Chris’ other explanation is even worse: This is the origin of “deviled ham.”

No, Chris, that’s not it.

The story in Luke 8 is a compelling story on so many levels. Matthew, Mark, and Luke, all related the same event with a few variations in details. I [preached](#) on Mark’s version of this text some in 2014. I have borrowed very few elements of that sermon, because it wasn’t a Christmas sermon.

I’m crediting (or blaming) Pastor Paul Cummings for choosing this story on Christmas Sunday. We had decided to preach on the four titles of Jesus from Isaiah 9 – Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. I asked Paul to choose one story from the Gospels to illustrate each title. For “Prince of Peace,” he chose this passage from Luke 8. As I dug into it this week, I realized it’s not only the right place to see Jesus as the Prince of Peace, it’s a perfect Christmas story.

Pining

Before we can embrace Jesus as the Prince of Peace, we have to understand what peace is. When we define peace, we tend to start with its opposite. Peace is the absence of conflict, of fear, of oppression, of violence, of war, of poverty, of stress, of tension, of disturbance, of wrongs, of sin.

The first reason Luke 8 is a perfect Christmas passage is that it's a story of longing. The situation before Jesus shows up reminds me of some of the lines from one of my favorite Christmas songs, "O Holy Night."

*Long lay the world in sin and error pining
Til he appeared and the soul felt its worth.*

It would be hard to create a story with more elements of the human misery caused by the Fall than the one in Luke 8. Luke sets it up exactly that way, starting with the horror of the story. For Jewish readers, the story starts out negatively with a description of where it happened – "the region of the Gerasenes." There's a good bit of uncertainty about where specifically that was, as you'll note from the footnote of any English Bible. But it doesn't matter, because all the options were on the far side of the Sea of Galilee from where Jesus grew up and centered most of his ministry. To a Jew from Jerusalem, even Galilee was questionable because of its mixture of Gentile people and practices. But the area on the other side of the lake was even worse. The Decapolis was overwhelming pagan.

We're not told whether the demoniac or any of the other people Jesus and the disciples met were Jew or Gentile, but it doesn't matter. We meet a man who is possessed by demonic forces, mentally deranged, streaking around with no clothes on, and living in a graveyard. The local residents had tried to chain him, but he would shatter the chains (29). He terrified everyone and lived in isolation (27,29). All of this would have created among his own people and among Luke's readers, Jew and Gentile, conflict, fear, oppression, violence – all of it. Luke is setting us up for Christmas.

In 1847, a French Catholic priest asked a layman known more for attendance to wine than to church to write a poem for the Christmas mass. The poet thought he came up with something pretty special, so he asked a famous composer of Jewish ancestry to write the score for "O Holy Night." The song became quite popular in Catholic France, but before long the Catholic church banned it in church because neither the lyricist nor the composer were model Christians. People sang it at home anyway.

There's more to the story of this song. In America, it became a theme song for abolitionists during the Civil War, because of these lyrics –

*Chains shall he break for the slave is our brother
And in his name all oppression shall cease.*

There's a legend that on Christmas Day 1871 a French soldier emerged from his trench and started singing "O Holy Night," an action that led to a cease fire for 24 hours. More certain is the story that on Christmas Eve 1906, "O Holy Night" was the very first song ever to be played over radio air waves.

The centuries are different and the details are different, but "O Holy Night" addresses some of the same themes as Luke 8. If you pine for relief from a world trapped in sin, oppression, conflict, and isolation, this is your Christmas story.

No Room

One would think that when there's so much need and human agony, there would be open arms of welcome for someone who comes to do something about it. Instead, the man, controlled by a legion of demons, shrieks, "What do you want with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I beg you, don't torture me!" Then later in the story, after the man is set free, people chase Jesus out of town because they are "overcome with fear."

Down through the ages, there are always those who raise this issue: Why do 2000 innocent pigs have to die? The answer is probably in the dramatic visual effect of releasing this man not from one demon but from a legion, in exhibiting the power of Christ over the unseen evil forces which are many and powerful but no match for him.

In any case it's also a strong statement that people matter more than economic interests. If we care more about making money than saving souls we don't have the heart of Jesus. We don't understand Christmas.

Here we find the parallel to a second aspect of the familiar Christmas story: "No room in the inn." The innkeeper in Luke 2 is often maligned for not giving Mary and Joseph a bed, but in fairness, he didn't know he was rejecting the Son of God. It's not like he ran a major hotel with hundreds of rooms. This was probably more like a bed and breakfast, with a few guest rooms. And besides, with the census, the innkeeper probably had people tucked in every conceivable warm corner.

Nevertheless, intentionally or not, he rejected the hidden Jesus. As a result, we have lines like this one another Christmas carol, "Thou Didst Leave Thy Throne"

*But in Bethlehem's home was there found no room for thy holy nativity.
O come to my heart, Lord Jesus, there is room in my heart for Thee!*

This song was written in the 19th century by Emily Elliott, the daughter of an Anglican pastor and the niece of Charlotte Elliott, who wrote, "Just As I Am." Emily Elliott was active in what were called "rescue missions," reaching out with kindness and the Gospel to people we would call the homeless, whether due to their own irresponsibility (such as alcohol abuse) or no fault of their own (mental health issues or

economic circumstances). She also had a Sunday School ministry, which in those days was primarily about evangelism and education for impoverished children.

So for Emily Elliott, the story of Christmas is a story about whether or not we are going to value people over things. Is there room for Jesus in the way we organize our priorities at Christmas? In the way we prioritize our lives all through the year? That's what is at issue here. Jesus doesn't force himself on this community that rejects him. If you need a story to help you wrestle through your Christmas priorities, this is it.

Peace

This is our primary theme today, that Jesus is the "Prince of Peace." In the Hebrew the emphasis is on the first word – that he's the "Prince." We tend to emphasize the second. But they are connected. "Prince" is a poor translation, because it implies he's somehow waiting for his turn to become King so he can do something.

A better translation would be "Commander" or "Captain" or "Officer" or, in our form of government, "Secretary of Peace" in the President's cabinet. To be sure, all of those titles imply that there is a higher power, but the focus here is on the idea that Jesus is in charge of peace, that peace is his delegated area of responsibility.

As I said earlier, we tend to think of peace as negative – the absence of conflict or oppression or fear. In the Hebrew vocabulary, *shalom* is a very positive thing. It is wholeness, wellness, soundness, completion, prosperity, security, quiet, friendship, harmony. It's not just what isn't; it's what is.

The best line in the demoniac story in Luke 8 comes in verse 35. The lead-in to that part of the story is that when Jesus cast out the legion of demons and they rushed down the steep bank and into the lake and drowned. Then the pigherds (like shepherds, only they're taking care of pigs and not shep) ran all over the town and the countryside and reported what they had seen. That would have created quite a stir and quite a crowd, not only because of the pigs but because of this notorious, deranged, naked, loud, tomb dweller. Can it be that he's really normal again?

When they all showed up, they saw him, "sitting at Jesus' feet, dressed and in his right mind." This is one of the great places to let your imagination sit there with him for a few moments. For the first time in who knows how long, he's quiet, he's sane, he's content, he's well, he's clothed, he's well, he's at peace.

In the carol, "Hark the Herald Angels Sing," we echo the song of the angels to the shepherds on the night Jesus was born: "Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace, good will to men." We sing these words:

Peace on earth and mercy mild, God and sinners reconciled.

The author of this carol was Charles Wesley, the great Methodist hymn writer from England. It's important to remember that in the 1700s the Methodists were a breakaway sect from the perspective of the Anglican church. The Anglicans were the established church, the church of the king and the parliament and the socially upstanding. By contrast, the Wesleys wanted to reach the masses. Carols were a way to teach the story of Christmas to those who couldn't read the Bible for themselves. They were also the way to teach the meaning of Christmas, and this carol is full of rich theology about God becoming man. "Emmanuel" – God is with us.

Charles Wesley wrote his first hymn in 1738, and it's probable that he wrote "Hark the Herald Angels Sing" that same year at Christmas. The great evangelist George Whitefield revised the original words a few later, and it's a good thing. It's hard to believe that "Hark, how all the welkin rings" would have given this carol the same level of popularity. By the late 19th century, even the Anglicans acknowledged "Hark" as one of the finest hymns ever written.

If you're looking for evidence that the Gospel brings peace – wholeness to every heart and relationship, this is your Christmas story.

Lord

Luke 8 ultimately is about who Jesus is. It's not just this story but the ones that precede and follow it in this chapter. Jesus stills the storm on his way from Galilee to Gerasene. When he returns home, he's met by a synagogue leader named Jairus who begs Jesus to heal his dying 12-year-old daughter. This past week, a 12-year-old boy named Ethan Parlier passed away in Hickory. He was the classmate of half dozen of my Confirmands at Clyde Campbell Elementary. 12-year-olds aren't supposed to die.

Jairus might have been among the skeptics at earlier times in Jesus' ministry, but now he's at the head of a crowd of people waiting for Jesus and the disciples to come back to Galilee. Jesus agrees to accompany Jairus to his home, but on the way there a woman who had been bleeding for as long as Jairus' daughter had been living touched his cloak. She was healed, but that delay meant that Jairus got the news that his daughter died. Jesus told him, "Don't be afraid; just believe." Jesus healed the woman, raised the 12-year-old, calmed the storm, and cast out a legion of demons. Is there anything he can't do?

No! He's master over disease and nature in the stories that lead up to this one, but he's master over even those forces we can't see and don't understand – the principalities and powers (Eph. 6). He's Lord of Jew and Gentile, Master of location and sequence, King of heaven and earth. That's the point Luke is making. Jesus tells the healed man to "return home and tell how much God has done for you." Jesus could have made a spectacle out of that man. "Hop in my boat. I'm going to take you on tour as Exhibit A of who I am and what I can do. Everywhere we go I'll give you a mic and let you tell your story so others will believe in me." Jesus will not make him a spectacle.

Nobody knows who wrote the Christmas carol, “Angels We Have Heard On High.” The story I like the best may be a legend but it actually fits the anonymous idea. Once again, it’s a mid-nineteenth century origin. This time it’s the story of shepherds in France who would sing to each other antiphonally from opposite hillsides on Christmas Eve: “Gloria in Excelsis Deo.” That’s Latin, of course, and not French – but then again, we’re talking about nineteenth century French Catholicism – when the story of Luke 2 was probably better known in Latin than in French, even to commoners.

These simple shepherds borrowed a Medieval tune and sang the words to each other. No one knows who wrote the rest of the words, but they were first published in French in 1855 and in English seven years later. As do most of the carols, they celebrate and honor who Jesus is:

Come, adore on bended knee Christ the Lord, the newborn King.

Two thousand years earlier, on a different hillside in Gentile-dominated Perea, a man sat next to Jesus completely free of his demons, normal in every sense of the word. Luke 8 is a Christmas story that points to Jesus as Lord.

Thank you!

So don’t try to tell me Luke 8 is not a good fit for Christmas Sunday. This is perfect. Thank you, Paul Cummings! Thank you, Luke!

And thank you, Jesus! This month we have focused on who Jesus is to us, because before that during the Fall season we studied Joshua. I said repeatedly, “Joshua is not about you; it’s about God.” Isaiah 9:6 is about you. More directly, it’s about who Jesus wants to be for you.

He’s the Wonder of a Counselor. Just as he did with Nicodemus, he will point you to the way to start over, to be “born again.”

He’s the God of Might. Just as he stilled the wind and waves on Galilee, his power will cause you ask, “Who is this?”

He’s the Father of Eternity. Just as he rebuked the disciples and welcomed the children, he will both discipline and tenderly love you.

He’s the Prince of Peace. Just as he evicted the demons and brought peace in the caves, he will keep your heart at rest when you trust him.

Amen.