

# SUPERPOWERS

by Rev. Shelli Williams

June 20, 2010

(Fourth Sunday of Easter)

9:45 a.m. Service of Word and Table



## ST. PAUL'S

### UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

5501 Main Street

Houston, Texas 77004-6917

713-528-0527

[www.stpaulshouston.org](http://www.stpaulshouston.org)

**Lectionary Texts:** 1 Kings 19:1-15a; Psalm 42; Galatians 3:23-29; and Luke 8:26-39

## **1 Kings 19:1-15a**

Ahab told Jezebel all that Elijah had done, and how he had killed all the prophets with the sword. <sup>2</sup>Then Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah, saying, "So may the gods do to me, and more also, if I do not make your life like the life of one of them by this time tomorrow."

<sup>3</sup>Then he was afraid; he got up and fled for his life, and came to Beer-sheba, which belongs to Judah; he left his servant there. <sup>4</sup>But he himself went a day's journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down under a solitary broom tree. He asked that he might die: "It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors."

<sup>5</sup>Then he lay down under the broom tree and fell asleep. Suddenly an angel touched him and said to him, "Get up and eat."

<sup>6</sup>He looked, and there at his head was a cake baked on hot stones, and a jar of water. He ate and drank, and lay down again.

<sup>7</sup>The angel of the Lord came a second time, touched him, and said, "Get up and eat, otherwise the journey will be too much for you."

<sup>8</sup>He got up, and ate and drank; then he went in the strength of that food forty days and forty nights to Horeb the mount of God.

<sup>9</sup>At that place he came to a cave, and spent the night there. Then the word of the Lord came to him, saying, "What are you doing here, Elijah?"

<sup>10</sup>He answered, "I have been very zealous for the Lord, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away."

<sup>11</sup>He said, "Go out and stand on the mountain before the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by."

Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake; <sup>12</sup>and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence. <sup>13</sup>When Elijah heard it, he

*wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. Then there came a voice to him that said, "What are you doing here, Elijah?"*

*<sup>14</sup>He answered, "I have been very zealous for the Lord, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away."*

*<sup>15</sup>Then the Lord said to him, "Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus; when you arrive, you shall anoint Hazael as king over Aram."*

## **Galatians 3:23-29**

*<sup>23</sup>Now before faith came, we were imprisoned and guarded under the law until faith would be revealed. <sup>24</sup>Therefore the law was our disciplinarian until Christ came, so that we might be justified by faith. <sup>25</sup>But now that faith has come, we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian, <sup>26</sup>for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. <sup>27</sup>As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. <sup>28</sup>There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. <sup>29</sup>And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise.*

## **Luke 8:26-39**

*<sup>26</sup>Then they arrived at the country of the Gerasenes, which is opposite Galilee. <sup>27</sup>As he stepped out on land, a man of the city who had demons met him. For a long time he had worn no clothes, and he did not live in a house but in the tombs. <sup>28</sup>When he saw Jesus, he fell down before him and shouted at the top of his voice, "What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I beg you, do not torment me" – <sup>29</sup>for Jesus had commanded the unclean spirit to come out of the man. (For many times it had seized him; he was kept under guard and bound with chains and shackles, but he would break the bonds and be driven by the demon into the wilds.)*

*<sup>30</sup>Jesus then asked him, "What is your name?"*

He said, “Legion”; for many demons had entered him. <sup>31</sup>They begged him not to order them to go back into the abyss. <sup>32</sup>Now there on the hillside a large herd of swine was feeding; and the demons begged Jesus to let them enter these. So he gave them permission. <sup>33</sup>Then the demons came out of the man and entered the swine, and the herd rushed down the steep bank into the lake and was drowned.

<sup>34</sup>When the swineherds saw what had happened, they ran off and told it in the city and in the country. <sup>35</sup>Then people came out to see what had happened, and when they came to Jesus, they found the man from whom the demons had gone sitting at the feet of Jesus, clothed and in his right mind. And they were afraid. <sup>36</sup>Those who had seen it told them how the one who had been possessed by demons had been healed. <sup>37</sup>Then all the people of the surrounding country of the Gerasenes asked Jesus to leave them; for they were seized with great fear. So he got into the boat and returned.

<sup>38</sup>The man from whom the demons had gone begged that he might be with him; but Jesus sent him away, saying, <sup>39</sup>“Return to your home, and declare how much God has done for you.”

So he went away, proclaiming throughout the city how much Jesus had done for him.

## I. What’s the Best Superpower?

I’ll begin with a question. It’s one of those questions that you’re asked in relatively meaningless surveys on the Internet: If you could choose a superpower, what superpower would you choose to have – extraordinary strength, invisibility, the ability to fly, super hearing, deep empathy? The possibilities are endless. Chances are, your answer will have something to do with those superheroes in your life, whether they be real or fantasy, with which you most identify. Because we all know that Superheroes have the ability to make things right, the power to do things that we cannot.

When I was little, I was totally enthralled with Batgirl. In her regular life, Barbara Gordon was pretty and nice and had herself completely together. She had a cute apartment and lots of clothes and manicured nails. But when things went

wrong in Gotham City, Barbara Gordon became Batgirl. Her well-furnished apartment would be transformed into her own Bat-enclave with one turn of a wall and everything would immediately look different. She would change clothes and change her persona and she would become a Superhero, speeding off into the city on her highly-equipped motorcycle, ready to save the citizens from whatever evil character was present that day. It was very cool!

## II. Stories of Superpowers

We like stories of Superheroes with superpowers. They make us feel safe, like someone else is there to step in and save us when things go awry. It is that mentality and that thinking that often surrounds this story of Jesus ridding Gerasenes of the demons that had somehow infiltrated their quiet city. The title for this episode could probably be “Jesus Defeats the Powers of the Abyss” or something, the powers of the unknown, the powers that we don’t understand, the powers that are beyond our control. In the layout of our canonical Scripture, it follows the account of Jesus calming the storm and is followed by the story of Jesus raising a girl to life. These are all signs of revolution and change.

Now we probably don’t do well with the idea of exorcisms – it’s a little beyond our realm of understanding and doesn’t really fit with the subjects with which we’re comfortable. But, whatever you make of demon-possession or the transfer to the swine, the central theme has more to do with the fact that Jesus came to bring liberation from whatever it is that imprisons people – externally or internally. Jesus brings about a confrontation of those powers. Jesus also brings a liberation *for* as well as a liberation *from*. Because when it was all said and done, the man formerly known as the Gerasene demoniac was not just freed from demons; he was made whole and realized who he was called to be in the world.

Now the word “legion” probably has a double-meaning. It can mean many or multitudes as in “many demons.” But it also refers to the Roman soldiers that were occupying Israel at that time. These, too, were seen as a form of “demon possession,” something beyond the control of the people. The presence of the herd of swine

implies that the land was being used by non-Israelites (because remember, pigs were considered “unclean” by Jewish law). So, then, why are the people not welcoming the liberation by Jesus from these that controlled their lives? Could it be that they were afraid to “rock the boat” or thought that they might have a more stable life under the regime of the Roman patrol? This was, after all, the side of the lake that included the Decapolis – the ten Greek cities that would become a part of the later missions of early Christians. But Jesus at this point was just an interfering outsider. Remember that acts of liberation are not always popular.

The language that Jesus uses to “silence” the demons is the same language that he used to calm the storm. Both stories are “unbelievable” in our modern understanding. And yet, why can’t we look at it as a choice to believe in the possibility of change – a choice of Jesus’ way over the ways that serve us in the world.

Most commentators would claim that this story probably “circulated” quite a bit before it was written down by the gospel writer known as Mark and then re-articulated by the writers known as Matthew and Luke. In fact, there are some key conflicting statements in the versions, including the location. (In Matthew, it occurs in Gadara, rather than Gerasenes, near the highest cliffs of the Golan Heights, for instance.) The point is, it doesn’t have to be literally correct to carry Truth. Perhaps the veiled message is just that – a veiled message that makes a statement about the world in which Jesus lived and a call to change and liberation. And perhaps the witness that we are called to share is pretty unbelievable to the untrained mind anyway.

### **III. Reframing Power**

Perhaps this story calls us to take another look at how we define power. For us, power is usually about control, about being in the position to be in command of the environment and the people that surround those with that power. We respect those who have power, even honor them to some degree. And for those powers that we deem the most powerful or the most accepted in our society, we seldom question or dispute their existence, no matter what we think of them. We look upon them as the “necessary evils,” so to speak, of a correct and ordered society.

Maybe that's the message here. Maybe this passage is trying to remind us that just because something or someone that is in place is powerful does not mean that it is the way it should be. Perhaps in some way this account of Jesus' confrontation with the demons, whatever you think they may be or represent, is a call to us to hold up a mirror to our own society and our own rules and our own lives and expose those powers that are not life-giving and inclusive. Perhaps it is a call for us to reframe our own expectations of what power looks like, and, with it, our expectations of liberation, salvation, and redemption.

Kathy K. Grow contends that "*true power belongs to the person who believes in redemption.*"<sup>1</sup> Because, after all, the people of Jesus are a people of redemption, a people of liberation, a people of change in the usual and the expected. The people of Jesus are not powerless to power.

#### **IV. A Higher Superpower**

The Bible, both Old Testament and New, is full of stories of liberation and redemption. That is who God is. That is the way God creates and recreates over and over again. In our Epistle reading that we read today, Paul is also reframing power, redefining a life and a society that is not merely enslaved to laws and rules and who belongs just because they've always been there, but rather one in which, through faith, the things that define that culture might be life-giving and unifying.

In our Old Testament reading, Elijah, too, becomes a victim of powers that have taken on a sense of evil and destruction. And so he runs away, hoping that God in all of God's power will step in and save him. And rather than just finding God in those places where he expected God, God shows up in the silent caverns of his life. Because it was there that Elijah was able to quiet himself enough to be aware of the way God was working in his life.

The message is that there is indeed power in silence, power in the quieting of the powers around us. It is an unexpected power. In her book, *When God Is Silent*, Barbara Brown Taylor claims that "silence is the central place of faith, where...we unsay ourselves and trust God to say us once again."<sup>2</sup>

Perhaps that is also the message in the story of the Gerasene Demoniac. After all, Jesus did not condemn or shun the man for his problem. He instead silenced the powers that had consumed the man's life and gave him back the power to become what God had created him to be.

The power of God is not a magic act. And we should not look at Jesus as a 21<sup>st</sup> century Christian superhero. God is much more than that. Jesus, God Incarnate, came as a first-century Jewish rabbi to give the world a glimpse of what God envisioned the world to be, to show the world what it could be and what it could become if only the powers that overshadowed that vision were silenced. And the message for us 21<sup>st</sup> century hearers is no different.

The real miracle is that God intervenes into the midst of the powers of this world in unexpected ways not to destroy them but in order to give us all the power that we need to change ourselves into what God created us to be. God is not some sort of eternal Superman character or almighty ringmaster that controls each and every moment the world takes. God intervenes through us. And in both the troublesome tumult and the soulful silences that make up Creation, God is revealed to us with a calling to do our part in liberating and redeeming the world. But it comes to us in ways that we do not expect.

Joan Chittister says that *"in every case, God wills more for us than the world expects. In every case, the power of God makes what the world calls imperfect perfectly right for us."*<sup>3</sup> God does have a superpower; it is the power to empower us.

So, if you could choose a superpower, what superpower would you choose to have?

I would think that we should all just choose the one that we've already been given. It is the power to change our lives and change our persona, to let God say us into being again. It is the power to turn the walls of this world around and silence those powers that are not life-giving. It is the God-given ability to see the world the way God does rather than limiting ourselves to seeing God the way the world does. It is the power of God's Spirit as it moves through our life and it is indeed the highest superpower.

In the Name of the Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer, who over and over says us into being once again.

(Endnotes)

- <sup>1</sup> Kathy K. Grow, “All Things Work Together”, in *Alive Now*, March/April, 2010 , 23.
- <sup>2</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor, *When God is Silent*. (Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publications, 1998), 33.
- <sup>3</sup> Joan Chittister, *In Search of Belief*, (Liguori, MO: Liguori/Triumph, 2006), 36-37.