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Expelling the demons of war

by John Dear

On the Road to Peace

War is never the solution. The Obama Administration's new war in Libya (on top of our current wars in Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan) will not bring God's peace to anyone; it just makes us all less secure.

These wars kill civilians and children, destroy the earth, fuel terrorism and bankrupt our economy. We have no money for schools, jobs, healthcare, housing for the homeless and food for the hungry -- but we always have money for war.

When will we learn? Why do we carry on the age-old methods of military occupation and warfare? And for us Christians, what must Jesus think of our militarism?

Last month in Palestine at the Sabeel conference scripture scholar Ched Myers, author of *Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark's Story of Jesus*, led us in an extraordinary bible study of Mark 5:1-20, the healing of the Gerasene demoniac.

Myers helped us understand God's response to military occupation and imperial domination. I thought I would share some of his insights to see how Jesus confronts the imperial domination of his day and what it might mean for us today.

We've all heard the story before but probably missed the political overtones. To be sure, whenever Jesus engages in exorcisms, he is liberating people from an "occupying" spirit, i.e., from the Roman Empire. He also longs to free us to live as children of God, and to follow him on the way of love and peace.

In the previous chapter in Mark, Jesus and the disciples set out across the Sea of Galilee to enemy territory. Jesus is determined to heal everyone; he truly loves enemies. This, of course, terrifies the

disciples.

Each sea crossing to "the other side" symbolizes Jesus' love for those in "enemy" territory and exposes the disciples' fear. In this case, a storm arises, which symbolizes the terror we all feel when we dare love enemies. The disciples are terrified by the wind, waves and storm -- signs of the inner tumult and public outcry we too would feel if we traveled to Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan or Libya.

Jesus calms the storm but insists we journey to "the other side." (This month, Kathy Kelly of Voices for Creative Nonviolence and 25 friends have embarked on just such a peacemaking journey to Afghanistan. The challenge of peacemaking, we learn, is to overcome our fears and make the journey, come what may.)

So Jesus enters the Decapolis, the ten federated cities colonized by settlements of Roman military veterans. He meets the demoniac, a man possessed by empire and death. He's out of his mind, doing violence to himself and others. He represents all those occupied by the powers of war, militarism and empire. Jesus expels the demons of imperial occupation and frees him. The story is worth rereading:

They came to the other side of the sea, to the territory of the Gerasenes. When he got out of the boat, at once a man from the tombs who had an unclean spirit, met him. The man had been dwelling among the tombs, and no one could restrain him any longer, even with a chain. In fact, he had frequently been bound with shackles and chains but the chains had been pulled apart by him and the shackles smashed, and no one was strong enough to subdue him. Night and day among the tombs and on the hillsides he was always crying out and bruising himself with stones.

Catching sight of Jesus from a distance, he ran up and prostrated himself before him, crying out in a loud voice, "What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I adjure you by God, do not torment me!" (He had been saying to him, "Unclean spirit, come out of the man!") He asked him, "What is your name?" He replied, "Legion is my name. There are many of us." And he pleaded earnestly with him not to drive them away from that territory.

Now a large herd of swine was feeding there on the hillside. And they pleaded with him, "Send us into the swine. Let us enter them." And he let them, and the unclean spirits came out and entered the swine. The herd of about two thousand rushed down a steep bank into the sea, where they were drowned. The swineherds ran away and reported the incident in the town and throughout the countryside. And people came out to see what had happened. As they approached Jesus, they caught sight of the man who had been possessed by Legion, sitting there clothed and in his right mind. And they were seized with fear. Those who witnessed the incident explained to them what had happened to the possessed man and to the swine. Then they began to beg him to leave their district.

As he was getting into the boat, the man who had been possessed pleased to remain with him. But he would not permit him but told him instead, "Go home to your family and announce to them all that the Lord in his mercy has done for you." Then the man went off and began to proclaim in the Decapolis what Jesus had done for him, and all were amazed.

Legion is my name. What a political statement! A legion was a division of two thousand Roman soldiers. Four legions were based in that area to control the eastern part of the empire.

By naming the possessed man "Legion," Mark offers a specific parable about how Jesus liberates us from

military occupation and empire. Militarism kills us spiritually and physically, as we see in the lengthy description of the possessed man's violence.

As the God of life, Jesus has come to liberate us. "Come out of him!" Jesus commands the destructive spirit. (He will say the same thing to the entombed Lazarus, as I explain in a new book to be released later this year, *Lazarus Come Forth!*)

Jesus wants to free all of us from military occupation and empire -- the people of Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya, Palestine and those of us here at home, all who are stuck in permanent war and global domination. If we are willing to hear his command, we will find healing and peace.

"Dispatch us into the swine," Legion says to Jesus. Swine were popular with soldiers, Myers told us in his presentation. The mascot for the tenth Roman legion in Judea at that time was a pig.

Mark describes them as a "herd," which is not the normal name for a group of pigs. Any reader of the time would know "herd" referred to a large group of Roman military recruits! Here Jesus uses military language and "dismisses" them.

So the swine run down the hill and are drowned -- a reminder of the Exodus account of Pharaoh's army being drowned in the sea.

Wouldn't the exorcism of the possessed man on the outskirts of town please the townsfolk? Not at all. They are frightened and run away. They do not want the man healed! They are used to violence. They have made peace with the forces of death. They do not want liberation from military occupation.

If they eject the Roman military from their area, they fear Roman retaliation. So they reject the nonviolent Jesus and his gift of liberation.

They know, too, that if the Roman soldiers and veterans leave, they will lose their income, their "way of life." After all, military occupation and imperial war-making appear to be good for business. The death of the pigs symbolizes the price for Jesus' gift of liberation -- the collapse of the local economy. (Jesus proposes an economy based on justice, sharing, sustainability, and nonviolence.)

Some of us hear this frequently when we vigil outside our local military installations, such as the Pentagon in Washington, the Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory in the Bay Area, or the Oak Ridge nuclear weapons complex in Tennessee.

"We can't quit," Los Alamos employees tell us when we vigil each year outside of the national nuclear weapons laboratories. "We need the jobs."

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We don't want nuclear disarmament because then we'll be unemployed, they say in effect.

So Jesus and his gift of liberation from militarism are rejected then and now. We do not want to be liberated from militarism, weapons manufacturing, occupation, war and empire. As Jesus turns to leave, the healed man begs to come with him.

But Jesus tells him to go back to his own people and announce all the good God has done for him. So the

healed demoniac becomes an apostle of peace who announces liberation from empire, much to the amazement of everyone.

Mark's text raises many questions about our own global military nightmare.

How are we possessed by the demons of war, militarism, occupation, weapons-manufacturing and empire? How is Jesus trying to expel those demons from us? Do we want to be healed?

What is the economic price we must pay if we as a people were to disarm, dismantle our arsenals, and lose our jobs involved in the military or nuclear weaponry? How have we rejected Jesus and his gift of healing liberation? What can we do instead to welcome his healing gift of disarmament?

Lent is a time to recognize that we as a people are thrashing around in chains and shackles, hurting ourselves and others, at home and abroad. Our support of empire is not working. As we head toward Holy Week, let's pray for the grace to allow Jesus to expel the demons of war, militarism and empire from among us that we too might possess the right mind of nonviolence.

Indeed, let's ask Jesus to send us forth like the healed demoniac to announce our liberation from militarism and empire. Jesus wants to heal us and show us the way forward into a new nonviolent world.

Our wars are not working. Let's listen to the nonviolent Jesus for a change.

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John Dear will lead a retreat on the Sermon on the Mount (April 29-May 1) in Los Angeles, and a retreat "The School of Prophets," on the prophetic tradition from Isaiah to Jesus, (May 20-22) at Kirkridge, near Bangor, PA (www.kirkridge.org). To hear a new podcast interview with John Dear, go to www.jesusradicals.com. His latest book, *Daniel Berrigan: Essential Writings* (Orbis), and other recent books, *A Persistent Peace* and *Put Down Your Sword*, as well as Patricia Normile's *John Dear On Peace*, are available from www.amazon.com. To contribute to Catholic Relief Services' "Fr. John Dear Haiti Fund," go to: <http://donate.crs.org/goto/fatherjohn>. For further information, or to schedule a lecture or retreat, visit: www.johndear.org.

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