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## *Sent Out As Faithful Witnesses*

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Two events early in the gospel of Luke tell us the identity and purpose of Jesus. The first is his baptism by John in the Jordan River, where a voice from heaven declares that he is God's beloved son. The second is his journey home to Nazareth, where on the Sabbath day he goes into the synagogue and identifies himself with a passage from the Prophet Isaiah:

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

The rest of Luke's gospel tells the story of how Jesus lives into his identity as the beloved son on a divine mission: proclaiming God's kingdom, healing the sick, exorcizing demons, releasing people held captive in body, mind and spirit. Jesus will not let his identity and mission be constrained by social and religious conventions. He steps out of what is comfortable and acceptable and reaches into the places where people are in pain and grief and oppression to restore life and wholeness.

In recent weeks we've listened to gospel stories describing how Jesus crosses boundaries in order to meet people in need. In the town of Nain Jesus meets a widow in the process of burying her only son. He reaches out and touches the bier the body is carried on, stopping the funeral procession. By touching the bier Jesus becomes ritually unclean. Another story describes Jesus attending a dinner party where a sinful woman begins to wash his feet with her tears and to dry them with her hair. Her sorrow for her sins moves Jesus to compassion and he offers her forgiveness. The taboo of touching a dead man or a woman will not stop Jesus from setting free those held captive by sin and death.

This morning's gospel story continues to push against social and religious constraints. When Jesus steps out of the boat onto the land opposite Galilee, he steps into a foreign and unclean world - gentile territory. Jesus is greeted by a man who is overwhelmed by demonic forces. He has lost all sense of propriety, wandering around naked. He is homeless, living in the tombs among the dead and the decaying. Tormented by demons he is violent and dangerous to others and to himself. Fearful of him his neighbors restrain him with chains - but their bonds do not hold. The man freely roams the cemetery, held captive by stronger forces than metal chains.

This onetime "man of the city" is now scarcely human. He has lost everything; his mind, his property, his identity. He has become the ultimate outcast. Yet none of these outward circumstances stops Jesus from reaching out to this wretched human being. Jesus sees through the death and the decay and the destructive power of the demons to find the man created in the image of God.

Jesus recognizes a person in need and not even a legion of demons, 6000 of them, will stand in the way of Jesus bringing release to this tormented captive. Jesus is in control and permits the demons to go as they wish into a herd of pigs. Unexpectedly the pigs rush into the lake and are drowned. These supernatural elements may challenge our modern

sensibilities, but they are not the main point of the story. The point is the man who encounters Jesus, who has been alone and lost and an outcast, is now set free from his long imprisonment. Jesus frees the captive by destroying the captor, bringing new life to a deathly existence.

Luke's story may be one of extremes and hyperbole. However, the feelings and circumstances that undergird the story are real. Most of us have felt alone or lost at one time or another. Sometimes we are pulled in multiple directions that make us think we might lose our way or our minds. Many of us have experienced feelings of abandonment or lack of support from family or community.

Two years ago I spent my summer fulfilling my Clinical Pastoral Education requirement. Each morning I drove to the opposite side of I-20, down Moreland Avenue to Metro State Women's Prison. Metro State is a highly structured, paramilitary institution with layers of rules and regulations designed to protect those who live and work there. But many of the officers and staff have little compassion for the incarcerated women in their care. They view the women only in light of their crimes, unable to see the person who is paying restitution for what they have done.

Even with all the structure, life behind the razor wire fences is often chaotic. Physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual needs permeate the lives of the women; at Metro there is a vortex of need. The chaplain's work is through word and action to bring life and hope to a population that often appears dead and hopeless.

Each chaplain intern is assigned to be the pastor of a housing unit of about 170 women. I was assigned to Building E, the housing unit designated for women diagnosed with the most severe mental illnesses. Life in prison is challenging enough, but when you add the stigma of mental illness or mental retardation life becomes even more unbearable. To the other inmates these women were simply crazy, and often the mentally ill were taunted, bullied and demeaned. While all women in prison have to deal with the consequences their crimes - estrangement from loved ones, isolation, loneliness, lack of identity and purpose - it is especially hard for women with limited emotional, intellectual, and social skills.

During my second week a young woman was transferred to Metro from another prison. Tabitha arrived, but all her personal belongings had been lost, misplaced, or left behind. Her only possession was the one piece jumpsuit that had "property of the state" emblazoned on the back. As I entered the holding area to meet her I noticed that both Tabitha's wrists were bandaged. I knew this meant that she was a "cutter" and the reason for her transfer.

Tabitha's smile was radiant, but there was little in her life to smile about. Many demons haunt her. She was abandoned at an early age - her parents were drug addicts. Her husband physically abused her. The grandmother who raised her had died of cancer. Estranged from her brother and sister Tabitha was alone in life, with no one to turn to for help. However, I liked her from the beginning and knew that we would visit together often. More than anything I wanted her to believe that God loves her, that she is lovable, and that her life has value because she was made in the image of God.

Because she had harmed herself, Tabitha was placed under a camera monitor in a solitary room. Her cell door had a small square window too far up for me to look through without standing on tiptoe. When I visited the officers opened the food tray door at waist level and we knelt on either side of the door, talking through the 4 inch gap. She hit me up for extra soap and shampoo donated to the chaplain's office and I'm certain she manipulated me for more items than I ought to have given her. Several times a week we talked about the lack of love in the world, about crime and punishment, about God and where God is in all the messiness of life. I read scripture and we prayed, and there were always more questions than answers. The most I could do was speak a word of hope in what seemed like a hopeless situation, and hope that God would use my feeble words to reach into her heart and help her learn to love herself.

In today's Gospel, the swineherds return to the city to tell what Jesus has done, and the people come out to investigate for themselves. They arrive to find the once demon-possessed man sitting with Jesus, clothed and in his right mind. There is always a reaction whenever and wherever the power of Jesus is made visible. Sometimes the people try to kill Jesus. Sometimes there is a mixed response of praise and fear. The Gerasene community responds by urging him to leave their country. In spite of the man's healing and restoration, what they cannot understand they cannot tolerate, even when Jesus does the miraculous.

As Jesus is getting into the boat the man asks to join him. But Jesus sends him back to his home in the city with a new task. He is to be a witness to all that God has done. So he goes back to his kinfolk and his neighbors proclaiming how much Jesus has done for him.

As my time at Metro came to a close I had to say my farewells and dreaded most my last visit to Tabitha. We knelt once again at the door to her cell. We both shed a few tears and said goodbye. After a prayer I started to leave, but she stopped me. I turned and she said, "I promise that I will not hurt myself again." I thanked her for the promise, but I asked her if she could make that same promise to herself. She smiled at me with that infectious smile and said, "with God's help, I think I can." I hope she has kept her promise.

There was nothing extraordinary about my time at Metro, many interns were there before me and many will follow. All I did was show up and tell the story of what God has done for me and what I know God wants to do for others. This morning we have encountered Jesus in the words of scripture. In a moment we will once again encounter Jesus in the bread and wine of the Eucharist. The last prayer we pray before we leave asks God to send us out to do the work that God has given us to do to serve as faithful witnesses.

Part of that work is sharing the story of what Jesus has done in our lives with our families and neighbors, with friends and strangers, with anyone who will listen. It is costly work because it requires us to step out of our comfort zones, to risk crossing social barriers and constraints. But when we tell the story, God uses it to set people free, to heal broken hearts and lives, to bring hope to the lost and the lonely. May God give us grace to do our work faithfully and with joyful abandon. Amen.