

Sisters and brothers in Christ, grace to you and peace from God our Creator, from our Savior Jesus Christ, and from the life-giving, in-dwelling Holy Spirit.
AMEN

CLICK - 3 IMAGES

What do a demon-possessed man, an elderly mother-in-law, and a leper have in common?

Sounds like the beginning of an unfortunately tasteless joke, doesn't it? But our first reading today begs the question: why were these three candidates - very unlikely, by the standards of the day - chosen by Jesus for healing?

CLICK - DEMONIAIC

The demon-possessed social outcast is not only deranged, but by virtue of that derangement others believed that God despised him; therefore, everyone despised him.

CLICK - MOTHER-IN-LAW

Despite being connected to one of the Twelve, the mother-in-law (a detestable class in some circles, even today) was viewed by society at large as a nobody, not to mention that healing her wouldn't garner Jesus any notoriety - though he and his buddies did score a home-cooked meal as a result.

CLICK - LEPER

And the leper: *EVERYONE* despised and avoided lepers: the very public display of their ailment was widely interpreted as God's very public punishment. If they were in such bad standing with God, then clearly humans should punish them, too. "Lepers" - which included anyone with any skin ailment, from acne, rosacea, eczema or psoriasis to full-blown disabling leprosy - were turned out of town so they wouldn't pollute anyone - physically or religiously. They were mistrusted, despised and rejected.

CLICK - 3 IMAGES

So, what do a demon-possessed man, an elderly mother-in-law, and a leper have in common?

They represent the most despised, most looked-down-upon, most avoided, shunned and universally rejected people of Jesus' - and many other - times.

They reflect the wide spectrum of unclean, unfit, dehumanized peoples within the "Pax Romana": the Peace of Rome - that being a giant euphemism, since the "peace" was kept under threat of brutal force and only certain "citizens" were afforded the rights that allowed for comfortable living.

In this setting, the demoniac, mother-in-law and leper were at the bottom of the barrel - despised by their own people and legally brutalized, raped and/or ostracized by systematic isolation - the demoniac fending for himself in the wilderness, the mother-in-law isolated at home, and the leper forced to live in a camp outside of town.

Together, these three also represent precisely *the* people Jesus came to heal and comfort, *the people* Jesus came to restore to a place in society, *the people* Jesus came to embrace and welcome.

Jesus was empowered for the daunting task of healing and binding up and welcoming and embracing all this broken world by taking time away, quiet time, silent time, to sit in God's presence and simply be.

Jesus' great compassion for outcasts flowed from a personal awareness of what it means to be rejected by your society simply for being born in the wrong place at the wrong time with the wrong "citizenship" credentials and therefore left to fend for yourself in a hostile world: Jesus was opened up to the realities of suffering when he became a refugee at the ripe old age of two.

CLICK - MAGI W/ STAR

Here's how that went down: no matter what your Christmas cards tell you, the Wise Ones weren't around for Jesus' birth; they arrived about two years later. As astrologers and philosophers, they watched the heavens for prophetic news of life on Earth. One night they saw a star indicating that a new and significant ruler had been born,

CLICK - MAGI MAP

somewhere to their west.

CLICK - MAGI MULTIPLE - BLUE

Intrigued, they followed the star.

For some reason God's ubiquitous angels were not dispatched to keep the Magi from seeing Herod, so conforming to socio-political norms, they checked-in with the current ruler of the region and spilled the beans about new royalty being born near Bethlehem.

Turns out, the ruler was a jealous tyrant. The spilling of the beans stirred the tyrant into a jealous - and violent - tirade: specifically, a killing spree of male infants and toddlers in and around Bethlehem.

The wailing of the parents was inconsolable, as any of us can only barely imagine.

CLICK - EGYPT

Joseph did get an angel and duly fled to Egypt. Jesus, at two, was a refugee, running from a government that not only wanted him dead, but wanted anyone like him in age, gender and religion to be dead, too.

As we move from the gaudy splendor of an American Christmas into Epiphany (on Wednesday) - which is really when we celebrate the arrival of the foreign Magi and begin a Season of the Light of Christ spreading out around the world - we would be extremely remiss if we didn't intentionally turn our focus from the joy of our own familial celebrations...

CLICK - REFUGEE FAMILY

...to the struggles of families, like Jesus', who would love to enjoy safety from tyrannical rulers; families who are fleeing nations - and local governments, and corporations - run by jealous, self-serving leaders;

CLICK - BLACK LIVES MATTER

families who suffer - here and abroad - simply because their status as "citizen" is being challenged and questioned by powers beyond their control.

We would be extremely remiss because we are precisely the people God has called to be the light of Christ, reaching out with a beacon of welcome and an embrace to those the world has so momentarily rejected.

Sadly, in the wealthiest, most comfortable nation in the world, rejection has become a new mainstay; self-centered fear and hatred have become American virtues - often disseminated under the guise of so-called "Christian values".

CLICK - STARBUCKS ANNUALLY

At the beginning of November there was a big to-do online about Starbucks, which has a several-year tradition of rolling out a new "holiday" red coffee cup early each November.

CLICK - RED CUP

This year the cup was simply red, with a green and white Starbucks logo.

Why should anyone care, right?

Well, a young man who self-identifies as an evangelical Christian and who has an extensive online following, decided to make a falsely defamatory and inflammatory video about how Starbucks' "red" coffee cup was oppressive of Christians - because it was not explicitly Christmasy enough. The video went viral - with over 14 million hits; major news media picked up the story; presidential candidates weighed in: things got way out of hand.

The rant may have been an attempt by the conservative blogger to get folks to boycott Starbucks, which is a politically progressive organization, but the point is, in response, Starbucks explained the simple design with this statement:

"Starbucks has become a place of sanctuary during the holidays... We're embracing the simplicity and the quietness of [the season]. It's a more open way to usher in the holiday."

They went on to say:

"Creating a culture of belonging, inclusion and diversity is one of the core values of Starbucks... Starbucks will continue to embrace and welcome customers from all backgrounds and religions in our stores around the world."

It's a ridiculous non-issue, of course - what kind of design Starbucks puts on their holiday cups - but the story illustrates the extraordinary weirdness that has become the public face of Christianity in America today: The self-proclaimed evangelical Christian created a divisive issue where there was none, lied as a way to simultaneously promote himself and purposely rile others to fear and anger, spread this lie as far and wide as the internet would allow and intentionally created a maelstrom of hatred that even led to violence.

Starbucks - while certainly not innocent of greedy motivations - *Starbucks* came out with this incredibly Christ-like response about openness, creating sanctuary, and embracing and welcoming guests of all kinds, all religions, from all over the world. The "Christian" said hate. *Starbucks* said, "sanctuary", "embrace" and "welcome".

The coffee cup kerfuffle is old news, probably best left in the past, but it reveals the incredibly divisive power of self-described Christians in the public eye who profess to follow Jesus, but who sound - and react - more like... Herod.

We are not meant to follow voices of division, anger and violence.

CLICK - DEMONIAK

Rather, like the demoniac, Christ calls us back from the wilderness of fear and hatred and restores us to the place and people amongst whom we belong;

CLICK - MOTHER-IN-LAW

like the mother-in-law, Christ lifts us up, out of our self-imposed isolation and reminds us that we are called to serve;

CLICK - LEPER

like the leprous man, Christ is healing up our brokenness - and rather than hoard that truly Good News for ourselves, it is ours to share - not only in telling our own salvation story, but in *making* the News, as it were, by creating space for healing and reconciliation, right here, amongst us, in our neighborhoods, in our homes, our schools, our workplaces, our politics, our hearts.

So, what do a demon-possessed man, an elderly mother-in-law, and a leper have in common?

They still exist:

CLICK - PRISON, ETC.

in the imprisoned, the homeless mentally ill and the institutionally ostracized elderly;

CLICK - WOMEN & TRAFFICKING

in women who have limited access to health care, who are raped, abused, trafficked, and enslaved;

CLICK - RACIAL PROFILING

in the racially profiled Mexican, the terrorized black citizen denied the rights of a white citizen, and the Muslim refugee seeking sanctuary.

CLICK - BLANK

These are our divisions. We don't face them alone.

We, too, are invited to find empowerment and encouragement by spending time in silence with God this Epiphany - and every day - so that, filled with the Holy Spirit, we too, can join Christ's healing, here and now, as we allow ourselves,

CLICK - HUGS

like Jesus, to be opened to the struggles of others, so that the Good News we share is that of reconciliation and peace; so that our welcome can be warm, our embrace, sincere.

AMEN