What story will you tell?

When I was in high school, and throughout college and into seminary, I was a member of a Christian denomination that many, now, might know as the Disciples of Christ. The Disciples grew out of a larger group—known as the Restoration Movement—started in during the Second Great Awakening—that sought to reunite the various other denominations through a return to New Testament Christianity. It didn’t want to adhere to anything that couldn’t be immediately found in the New Testament. It held to several signature slogans. One was “Where the Scriptures speak, we speak. Where the Scriptures are silent, we are silent”. That implied that the Bible was very important to the Disciples, and I’ll be forever grateful for the grounding that church gave me in the Scriptures. But it was that same grounding in Scripture that led me to question that marker of the Reservation Movement.

Of course, I wasn’t the only one to find some inconsistencies. For example, one of the founders of the movement was a staunch unitarian. He couldn’t find clear evidence of classic Trinitarian doctrine in the New Testament; the Trinity was clearly a historical—post-biblical—development. But, since it was difficult for most Christians from other churches to let that doctrine slide, there were controversies from the very start. Another source of discussion, of course, was how to understand what to do when the “Bible is silent” on an issue. One wing of the church told stories of the New Testament’s silence on pianos and organs as prohibitions of using musical instruments in public worship; the more liberal wing saw the silence on that matter as allowing different “stories”.

I spent a lot of time this last week thinking about that Restoration Movement period of my life, and especially the challenges posed by silence, or, conversely, the assumption that what is said is the only story. What prompted me to go down that memory lane was our reading from Luke’s Gospel, the well-known account of Jesus and the man who has been “taken over” by “Legion”. It’s an important account, appearing in all three Synoptic Gospels, with some minor variations. But what is shared by all three are two things I find curious. The first is that the man never asked to have the demons expelled. That oddity we’ll have to leave for another time. The second curiosity is that, after the demons have left the man for the pigs (who then run into the sea to their death), the townspeople basically run Jesus out of town.
Interpreters have come up with different “stories” to explain the account. Some see the reference to “Legion” being an allegory about Judea’s occupation by legions of Roman soldiers. Others see the townspeople’s response (non-Jews, by the way) being a part of Luke’s greater story of when and how the non-Jews become part of the Christian movement. Again, those interpretations will have to wait for another time. What most interests me is that the healing, the man’s restoration to wholeness, is not celebrated by the townspeople! According to the account, they had had to restrain one of their own to keep him from harming himself or others. So, why was their reaction to his being restored “to his right mind” by Jesus not one of celebration?

I understand that the Gospel-writers had their own reasons for telling the story as they did. But I want to set that aside for a moment and suggest that we enter not into the Gospel-writers’ telling of the story, but into the event itself. I’m not going to re-tell the whole account, but imagine two options of the conclusion. The first is what we basically just heard: the witnesses to the exorcism run back to town and tell folks that a Jewish healer had come and had ruined their economy by casting the demons into the pigs, which then ran into the sea. The townspeople’s response: fear, and “Get that guy out of town before he does any more damage!” But what might have happened, if (option two), the witnesses had run back to town with a different story, exclaiming that “Our neighbor has been restored to his right mind! Now he can come home again!” Both are accurate recounting of the events . . . but they are different interpretations of what happened, very different stories. Imagine the response if the second story had “won the day”.

Two accounts of the same story. One, basically, seeing the “dark side”; the other, the brightness and hope. This phenomenon reminded me of another dual story telling, one from Jackie Kelm’s *The Joy of Appreciative Inquiry* (Tarcher/Penguin: 2008). She writes:

> [T]wo people . . . simultaneously witnessed a traumatic event . . . [T]he first person wrote:

> I witnessed a man in a horrible industrial accident at my workplace. I stood there as he begged for relief and screamed in pain as people tried to help and waited for the ambulance. I couldn’t move. I didn’t do anything. For about a week after that I was barely functional. I ate, did my work, and slept. I couldn’t do my joy journal at that time. Joy seemed so very far away and not something that I deserved.
[She continues] . . . Now consider the story told by the second person:

I witnessed a serious accident in which a coworker friend of mine was badly injured in an industrial accident. It happened in a large group and was very traumatic for everyone involved. However, what was really remarkable was that the incident was a catalyst for a lot of really incredibly wonderful things. First, the people involved did a phenomenal job of taking care of him and each other to deal with the situation both immediately and in the weeks that followed. . . . Second, in caring for my friend during his recovery, I found myself put on the path to an entirely new chapter of my life, as the experience has prompted me to go to nursing school. . . . And strange as it may sound, there were many moments of joy throughout that whole ordeal, even for my friend, who has already recovered far beyond his doctor’s expectations!

Consider these two accounts of the same event. . . . Both were in the same situation, but they had completely different experiences and perspectives about what happened. We live in the world our stories create (14-15).

There are some striking overlaps between Kelm’s story and that of the Gospel story, but we only have the first account—the horrific one—in our reading this morning; the second—the hopeful one—is absent.

Luke implies, it seems to me, that the townspeople didn’t recognize the possibilities offered to them in that dramatic exorcism. As Jesus points out in a few chapters, “if it is by the finger of God that I cast out the demons, then the kingdom of God had come near to you” (11.20). But the townspeople, chained, like the demoniac, by the demons of “life-as-it-is”, rather than the possibility of life in God’s realm, chose to tell, and believe, a story about a problem. How we choose to tell a story is so significant. It can reinforce what we already believe, or it can create a new world. But it takes work . . . in some respects it takes repentance—a change of mind.

Taking a slight tangent, I remember, when a graduate student, being taught to caution students to avoid the passive voice—especially when writing in the first person, because “the passive voice hides agency”. We were to point out that, when a student used the passive voice in writing a lab report, for example, it often meant that the student could avoid taking responsibility for a faulty procedure. But that might ALSO mean that the student might miss an opportunity for learning. In other words, how the students told the “story” of their experiment might be transformative, if they only reflected a bit more on what happened, if only they “repented”, or changed their mind.
How Luke had the townspeople tell the story contributes to keeping them from being transformed. Certainly there’s more behind the Gospel account than the event itself. But, bound up in the culturally-linked issues of Jew/Gentile, purity/cleanliness, Jewish disdain of pigs, and threats to life/livelihood were larger questions: “What happens when we witness the Kingdom of God coming near?”, and/or “What are we willing to relinquish so that others might be made whole?” Yet, in their telling, the townspeople cast themselves as victims, even as their neighbor is a victor. And they miss the Kingdom of God as it drew near.

I see so many implications, or applications, of this question, “What story will you tell?” Clearly, we get alternate stories of current events depending on what websites we visit or news-channels we watch. And the questions are obvious: “Which paint us as victims?” “Which lead to hope?” I let you answer those questions for yourself, as you grapple with the Kingdom of God drawing near. But I come down closer to home, away from the screens and the front page, to Good Shepherd and those of us who are gathered here this morning.

What stories do we tell about our encounters with God? As a congregation, how do we see God active in our past history? I don’t believe we can look to “glory days” and say “God was active then!”, and then turn to more challenging times, and say that was when “God was absent.” God is with us, through thick and thin! What, then, are the stories we tell that cast us as victors, rather than victims. As we wind up our Season of Discovery, that should be the story we’re telling . . . and that story will help guide us as we move forward.

But the question is more personal: “What story will you tell about God’s action in your own life?” I think many of us shy away from “evangelism” because we think it’s all about telling a harsh story, like, “You’re a sinner! Repent or you’ll go to hell!” People really don’t want to hear that, and I certainly don’t want to tell it. Our “townspeople” want to hear stories of how God met us where we were, and has made a positive difference in our lives. Casting out demons may make the front page, but how we entered and remained in the grace-filled kingdom of God will remain long after the current news-cycle. Each of us will have a different story to tell. We may have to go back to the editing table and look at the events differently, but it is the “Kingdom of God drawing near” that drives the telling.

What story will you tell?

Amen.