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## *What Possesses You?*

**A sermon by Canon Lauren Holder**  
**Epiphany 4 – Year B**

One of the things I love about the Gospels is that they are so relatable. I know that might seem far-fetched on a week where our Gospel reading is about a public exorcism. I know I've only been at the Cathedral less than a week, but to my knowledge, the clergy are not frequently casting out demons—and it certainly wasn't in the job description presented to me before coming here. It might seem at first glance that this Gospel has little to do with us.

But put in simpler terms—we have a story of a person possessed by something, and Jesus setting the person free. And so my question becomes—who among us has ever felt possessed?

I don't need a show of hands.

But I'll be the first to raise mine.

One of the things you'll learn about me is that I have a favorite quote I have clung to for years. It hangs on the wall of my office, and even Bishop Curry mentioned it at my ordination, remembering the words had shaped my discernment to become a priest. The quote is simply: "The glory of God is the human person fully alive" (Irenaeus).

The glory of God is the human person fully alive.

If I want to glorify God in any moment, the greatest honor I can give God is to be precisely the person God created me to be, and be that person to the fullest.

In today's gospel, the man possessed by an unclean spirit confronts Jesus. Something had taken hold of this person, of this child of God, and was keeping him from being his most authentic self. And Jesus, seeing the man, restores him. Jesus silences the demons, casts them out, and restores this child of God to himself and to his community.

My question for us in light of today's texts is this: what is keeping you from being your most full self. What things or thoughts or feelings possess you?

I can give you a laundry list to choose from: Loneliness. Business. Keeping up appearances. Keeping up with the Jones'. Fear of failure. Grudges. Too much of one thing or too little of another. Shame. Greed.

I'll give you two examples from my life.

The first is from just this week. We have a 10-month old daughter and a 2.5 year old son, both in daycare, so runny noses and colds are a constant—as you might imagine. As much as I know just how normal our reality is, this week I was gripped by guilt that our youngest was going to daycare every day while teething and battling a cold, and crippled by fear that one of her teachers or one of the other parents would think I was a "bad mom." It wasn't until Thursday morning, talking to my husband on the phone while driving into work, telling him about how I was failing as a mom and how others were going to judge me, that I heard the voice of reason. Jay asked, "Do you seriously think people are walking around thinking you're a bad mom because Lucy Rae has a runny nose?" I argued for a second, but I knew it was futile. I had been possessed

by an unreasonable fear that had brought me to tears earlier in the week—it was so real—but then laughed it off with another mom the next day. Does any kid not have a runny nose right now? Why did I let something so trivial bring me down?

The second example is a little harder to share. I already told you how I love the quote, “The glory of God is the human person fully alive.” There are several things in my life that help me to be fully alive: being a partner, a mom, a daughter, a friend, a priest. But there is one thing I am not yet—a writer. At my core, I long to write. I think about it all the time. Several times a day. I think about things I want to write, I think about how to create time in my life to write, I think about how to get started. But I never do. And when I think of all the things that hold me back from being “fully alive” as a writer, the list is long: I don’t have time; what if I start and then can’t keep it up; what if people don’t like what I write; what if I have nothing original to say; what if I’m wrong; what if I fail. All of these things boil down to one thing that possesses me: fear. And really, I wonder if that’s not true of all of us. If we think of the things that “possess us” and keep us from being fully alive—are they not, for the most part, rooted in fear?

Earlier I asked if anyone in here had ever been possessed, and perhaps you thought that sounded weird.

But if I ask if anyone in here has ever been possessed by fear—does that resonate with you? This is why today’s Gospel is so relatable.

Last week’s Gospel had Jesus inviting us to follow him. Is there anything in your life that makes following Jesus feel impossible?

This week’s Gospel has Jesus freeing a man of demons—restoring a person to be fully alive.

Our reading from 1 Corinthians today says, “Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up.” In this season after Epiphany, we continue to dwell in the light of Christ as love incarnate—love that came down at Christmas—love among us in the person of Jesus.

And elsewhere in the scriptures we are reminded that, “There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear” (1 John 4:18).

Sisters and brothers in Christ—love is a powerful force. Love is not just sunshine and rainbows and snuggles—Love stares Evil in the face and says, “Be silent—and leave.” Love faces Fear head-on and says, “There is no room for you here. Stop spreading lies and get out.”

I want us to ask ourselves this week—what is possessing my life right now. What is keeping me from being fully alive?

And then ask ourselves—how can I claim the love of Jesus as a power that casts out fear. Where do I see the love of Jesus at work in my life, and how can I let that love truly build me up to be fully alive to the glory of God?

And know that you don’t have to face your fears alone. Jesus restored the man in our story today while in the synagogue—right smack in the middle of his faith community. And here we are, the Body of Christ gathered together—possessed by one thing or another at one time or another—but walking in Love together.

Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up. May the love of Christ cast out any demons of fear lingering in your life. May you leave this sacred space assured that God loves you—and let that love empower you to be your most real, most bold, most full self—to the honor and glory of God.

Amen.