

The man possessed by demons was also beset by whatever it was that caused his inner turmoil – and by his horrendous living conditions. Take away the archaic “demon” language and it's not so hard to think of so many of the homeless people on the street, facing daily physical threats, but also plagued by Post Traumatic Stress and other mental illnesses.

We can think of the threats in our own lives to our sense of well-being, our sense of connectedness with the Holy. And oftentimes it is the attacks from within that are most difficult to withstand. We do have “demons” that need to be cast out. In today's language we would call them hurtful voices from the past, old tapes, negative parental messages, bad societal influences, our inner critic or inner committee. You know what I mean: the voices that try to drown out the “still, small voice” of God that whispers “You are beloved; you are wonderful; you are good; you are precious; you are Mine.”

And this is the second thing these stories have in common: the reality of God's presence in our lives and in the world. This is what gives us hope – as well as the courage and energy to be co-creators in God's work of shalom.

In the deepest depth of his despair, Elijah had a direct experience of the holy presence of God – not in a dramatic show of power like an earthquake or a whirlwind, but in the sound of sheer silence (a thin whispering voice, a still small voice, a soft, whispering murmur). This story reminds us that in the midst of our most severe challenges, God will provide inspiration and energy. Of course we need to listen. We need to find those spiritual practices that help us hear the divine whisper above all the noise we usually hear.

We need to trust that there is, as Thomas Merton believed, a “hidden wholeness” at work in us. He recognized that our capacity to perceive this God-given reality of transparency and interconnectedness has been diminished and distorted, has become in fact “hidden,” and he used phrases like “hidden wholeness” and “hidden ground of love” to name this foundational reality.

That reality was still there, deep within the man among the tombs. And through Jesus, the healing power of God came to the fore and was hidden no longer. He was restored to a new life of hope and possibility. That reality is still there – here – as we confront the challenges at hand. As we begin our summer theme of *Growing as a Congregation of Disciples*, it comes to mind that we are not so different today. We long for connection with the Holy; we long for wholeness, both in our personal and communal spheres of our lives.

On our personal faith journeys, we wait, even in the midst of challenges from within and without, just as Elijah did. One of the most important questions we can ask ourselves as we open ourselves up to the still, small voice in the sheer silence, is: whose voice am I going to listen to, whose voice am I going to believe? Our answer to that question will tell us how we are growing personally as disciples.

It will also inform us as we think about growing the congregation, growing as a communal body of growing disciples. There is no question, growing a congregation these days is not easy. The Christian church in general is experiencing significant decline in membership and social influence. In the past decade or two, there have been many studies and consultants' programs that have offered more and better ways to restore congregational growth in every denomination. They don't work. For many reasons. Suffice it to say that the church today appears to be suffering much as Elijah did. And we can sit on the pity pot as Elijah was doing or we can get up and listen for the possibilities before us to bring the “hidden wholeness” of God to light into the lives of others.

And then we have our newspapers, which might be the most challenging place of all to believe that there is a “hidden wholeness” at work in the world. It is certainly true that the quest for wholeness of the world is constantly under threat, from both within and without. Natural disasters like Hurricane Katrina and the earthquake in Haiti are the most recent examples of the earth itself creating mayhem. And as the BP oil spill reminds us, we ourselves are a serious threat to global shalom.

The reality of God’s presence in our lives and in the world does not shield us from catastrophe, personal or communal. The Jezebels are out there; there is danger to be sure. The demons are there too, those within us, as well as the truly evil, fear-mongering, greedy, death-dealing powers that seem to be in control.

But there is good news in these stories today that we *can* read along with our newspapers. And that is that there is always hope for wholeness. It may often be hidden to us, but God’s will for shalom is there. And that is what gives us the energy to become God’s partners in the quest, to make life choices and decisions that are in alignment with the healing of the world.

I’m surprised at how many people react to the *Christian Call for Lament and Reconciliation* by saying that instead of this we need to be doing something and calling the corporations and the government to accountability. But it’s not an either/or proposition. It’s a both/and.

As *Growing Disciples*, we tend to our own gardens, and nurture the Spirit within. Part of that is self-reflection, self-examination (it’s not just for Lent anymore!), and repentance when necessary. As a *Congregation of Growing Disciples*, we tend to our world, seeking those actions that reflect our desire – and God’s desire - for shalom, actions that help us live into St. Paul’s vision of radical inclusivity and connectedness, and actions that witness to the reign of God that Jesus proclaimed and embodied.

I heard an interview with Jackie DeShannon this week, remember she sang *What the World Needs Now is Love*? It might sound hokey, but it’s true. What the world needs now *is* love, sweet love. And we are the ones who can be and need to be and will be the conduits of God’s radical, cosmic, powerful, unconditional, amazing, sweet love, wholeness, and shalom.

Amen

The BP Oil Spill: A Christian Call for Lament and Reconciliation **<http://www.ipetitions.com/petition/lamentbpoilspill/>**

As followers of Christ, creator and redeemer of all creation, we mourn the Deepwater Horizon catastrophe and the BP oil spill now polluting the Gulf of Mexico. We mourn the human and animal lives lost, the economies and ecosystems destroyed, and the gifts of God, created from and for his love, squandered and poisoned. Most of all we mourn our complicity and active participation in an economy based on toxic energy that has made such death inevitable.

We find our lives dependent upon the destructive forces that have been made visible in the oil spill, but which have been a sinful and deadly presence in creation for many decades now. We acknowledge that our current lifestyle of convenience and hyper-mobility, which is based on oil and oil-based products is at the root of the problem and that the irresponsibility and hubris of companies

such as BP are only outgrowths of this deeper reality. As the prophets of old said, we hear the land witnessing and testifying against us.

Having acknowledged these realities we now make a public confession of the sins against God's creation that we have committed and have been committed on our behalf. We pray for the grace of God to change our lives, and we invite all of our Christian sisters and brothers to join us in this acknowledgement of our sin and culpability, and in working toward a true repentance.

As a sign of this recognition of our sin we commit to:

- Fasting from all food on Fridays except that which has been locally grown with methods that do not rely on petroleum-based fertilizers and pesticides.
- Making every effort to take each Friday as a day when we do not drive but rather walk, bike, ride public transit, or carpool to school or work.
- Praying for the transformation of our lives as individuals and churches toward freedom from fossil fuels and reconciliation with all God's creation.
- Continuing these practices until the oil spill has been cleaned up and the work of restoration of God's creation in the Gulf has begun.

On Sunday June 20, the two month anniversary of the beginning of the spill, we invite all Christians to lament the oil spill with a fast from oil. On that day, we will celebrate the Sabbath as we mourn: abstaining from driving motor vehicles of any kind, avoiding food that was grown and shipped great distances, and reflecting on the aspects of our lives that are so entrenched in the oil economy that we cannot even quit them for one day.

We commit to exploring other appropriate acts of lament in our own church communities.

We hope that on this national day of lament, church communities will gather together for meals prepared of local ingredients and begin to discuss a new future that honors God's creation and seeks to love the world as God does. Out of these discussions we pray that communities will begin to organize farmers markets, encourage alternative modes of transportation, and build a creative hope in their communities.

We are confident in God's grace to give us hope from our lament as we repent and turn from our sin. Now is the time for our turning.

Litany of Lament

We hope to join with our congregations in mourning this disaster by praying together this litany in our churches.

The earth is the LORD's, and all that is in it. (Ps 24:1)

From the depths of our hearts, as from the depths of the seas, let lamentation pour forth over what we have made of this good earth.

In the garden, our first home, you planted two trees, O God: one to feed us, and one to limit us. (Gen 2:16-17)

As Adam and Eve ate what was forbidden to them, we have feasted on the bounty of your creation, but ignored the boundaries you ordained. Forgive us, we pray, and teach us proper restraint.

Oil pours into the sea, a judgment against our destructive pursuit of a life that is cheaper, faster, and easier.

For these sins, the land trembles and the people mourn. (Amos 8:8)

If the people of God are silent, the very stones will shout out! (Lk 19:40)

We confess our silence. This disaster leaves us speechless; Lord, give us the courage to repent with our lips, and with our actions.

The earth is the LORD's, and all that is in it. Hear the cries of your servants, O Lord.

Deliver your creation from this peril, and put a new and right spirit within us. (Ps 51:10)