

In each issue, the evangelical magazine, *Christianity Today*, shares a reader's conversion story, testimony about how Jesus changed that person's life. These stories make very compelling reading. For example, here's a condensed version of Francine Rivers' close encounter with Jesus:

I was addicted to romance novels, Francine said, then God asked me to start writing them, for his glory. Francine grew up in a Christian family and assumed that made her a Christian. She began writing in her grief over a miscarriage, but soon writing had taken over her life. She and her husband met Jesus, though, by reading scripture, and they soon found themselves "in God's transformative program." God took away her writing, for a while, until she understood that she had relied on writing for her identity and sustenance, hollow things compared to God. Then, God gave her a new writing mission.

After reading stories such as these, I understood that, to evangelicals at least, conversion begins with an experience that changes a person's world view. And then, after this "Big Bang" of faith in Jesus, there is an ongoing unfolding of a new way of life in Christ.

We Episcopalians, on the other hand, often experience a more gradual unfolding of our faith, a process that nudges us into more Jesus-like living. There is nothing wrong with coming to Jesus in this way, if we understand that choosing Jesus is more than just "becoming good people." Christianity is far more than doing good works. But, I've noticed, we Episcopalians are very uncomfortable with a spiritual "Big Bang."

Like the man in the synagogue in today's gospel lesson, we acknowledge that we know who Jesus of Nazareth was and is: The Holy One of God. And then we often tell Jesus we are afraid that doing what he asks of us will destroy the comfort of our status quo or the benefits of whatever questionable "good gig" we are engaged in.

We don't know what "good gig" the demon-infected man in the synagogue was afraid Jesus would destroy. In fact, all we know about the man is that he was in the synagogue and he had an unclean spirit—a demon—within him. We don't know whether he was sitting in the Chief Seats, reserved for religious leaders, or if he was a more ordinary person sitting on the floor.

We know that the evil spirit in this man was afraid Jesus would destroy "us," presumably the demon AND the man. Notice how the spirit spoke



for the person in whom he resided, a person who didn't (or couldn't) cry out to Jesus, "Save me. Heal me. Help me."

This was Jesus' first recorded miracle, so the people in the synagogue didn't yet know about Jesus' healing capabilities. But they recognized his authority as a teacher. They recognized the Word of God that spoke through him. God's Word is self-validating, and the people, including the evil spirit, knew God's Word had been spoken.

We don't know what Jesus said that day, just that he spoke the Word of God, the Word that pierces hearts and makes unclean spirits cry out in fear. Maybe Jesus spoke as he had when calling disciples: "The Kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel."

And what WAS the gospel then, before Christ Jesus died on the cross and defeated death, so that we all might have life? What about this passage from Zechariah 2?

The Lord says, 'Shout and rejoice, O beautiful Jerusalem, for I am coming to live among you. Many nations will join themselves to the Lord on that day, and they, too, will be my people. I will live among you...

Or this jewel from Isaiah 61?

The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because the Lord has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor and the day of vengeance of our God, to comfort all who mourn, and provide for those who grieve in Zion—to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of joy instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair.

But we can only guess what Jesus taught on that day. What we know is that then the demon spoke up.

There was a seminary professor, now deceased, who advised preachers to pay no attention to the man with the demon. This professor thought the important message is Jesus' great authority. This professor was worried his students would lose credibility by their congregation's modern-day unbelief in demons.

And truly, this professor had a point. "Today we know this man was mentally ill," people tell me all the time. Well, I didn't believe in demons, either, until I met someone who was possessed by evil. The

most recent time was two years ago at the Mount Vernon Psychiatric Center, where psychiatry wasn't doing very well in helping the person.

But I digress. My goal isn't to convince you that evil can invade and enslave us. Evil can; that's a fact that no amount of denial can wish away.

Unclean spirits use many tools to find a host:

- Substance abuse and addictions that promise to fill up emptiness;
- Greed and lust for power that promise false purpose in life;
- Gossip to assure that we aren't the only ones who lack perfection; and
- Certainty that only we know the mind of God, to cure our inferiority complex.

However, an encounter with Christ Jesus and with the Word of God can break through the toughest enthrallment. Jesus confronted the demon, silenced it, and commanded it to leave the man.

Elsewhere in scripture, Jesus says we must be careful at such times. If we leave ourselves empty, other evils, worse evils, can enter in. What Jesus did was free the man so that he could choose for himself his future path: Follow Jesus or become a dry drunk, spiritually speaking. We don't know which the man chose.

The Good News here is that Christ Jesus can and does free us from whatever holds us captive, if we immerse ourselves in his Word. Repent, and believe in the gospel.