

The Episcopal Church of the Good Shepherd  
The Rev. Morgan S. Allen  
June 20, 2010  
*IV Pentecost (Proper 7, Year C), Luke 8:26-39*

Based on Upton Sinclair's 1927 novel, *Oil!*, Paul Thomas Anderson's film, *There Will Be Blood*, opens in a New Mexico desert in 1898, where Daniel Plainview searches for silver with a pick. While he, in the mine, discovers a vein of ore, above him, at the mouth of the cave, his mule falls over dead from the oppressive heat. Daniel, bearing a heavy load of stone and metal, walks around the dead animal and loads his wagon, but as he climbs back into the hole, a foothold breaks and he falls abruptly to the floor of the mine, snapping his right leg. He passes out.

The film cuts to Daniel waking with gasp. He pulls himself out of the mine to discover that the wagon has tipped over under the weight of the rock it holds, and his canteen has spilled in the tumble and now sits in a small circle of mud. There is another cut, and Daniel pushes the righted cart with his back and his one good leg, slowly moving to a town we can just make out along the horizon.

Jesus and his disciples cross the Sea of Galilee. Stepping out of the boat, a "man of the city" confronts Jesus. There is a cut, and we see this man, naked and living in a graveyard. His hair, long and disheveled, frames an unshaven face and a nearly toothless, maniacal grin. His back arched, he wrings his hands nervously – compulsively – and moves quickly through the shadows of headstones.

Another cut, and we see the man, some years earlier, chained to the wall of a cave. While his hair is shorter and his beard shows only new growth, his eyes plainly witness the familiar madness he will reveal in the cemetery. Flailing about against the wall, the metal of his shackles presses into his flesh and draws blood until, in a rage, he rips the chains from the rock and scales the wall of his prison like a frightened salamander.

It is 1902, and Daniel Plainview walks with a limp toward another dark hole. There is a cut, and he and three men work furiously in the pit to turn a large pipe into the ground, pushing and pulling and twisting and slipping on oil-soaked shale. The bit suddenly catches and will not budge. After a breath, the four men have at it again, grimacing and grunting, screaming until the bit loosens and suddenly spins freely, without any interference at all. They lift the long pipe out of the ground and discover its end dripping with oil. Another cut, and the men are kneeling at a small, black pond of crude which they urge into dusty barrels, into bottles, buckets, cans, and any container that they can find.

In a shrill scream, the naked man screeches: "What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I beg you, do not torment me." The disciples, stand behind their teacher at a distance. His eyes squinting, Jesus asks the man, "What is your name?"

"I am Legion," the man replies in a deep, reverberating voice. Raising his flashing eyes to meet those of Jesus, he sneers angrily, "I am Legion, for I am *many*." Suddenly, in the

pleading voice of a child, the man begs Jesus, “Please, Holy One. Leave me be! Do not send me into the abyss!”

It is 1908, and Daniel Plainview has exchanged his oil-soaked overalls for an overcoat. He wears a neatly trimmed mustache and sits in a high-backed chair on a makeshift stage before a standing-room only audience of farmers and ranchers. He addresses the body: “Ladies and gentlemen, I’ve traveled over half our state to get here this evening. I couldn’t get away sooner because my new well was coming in at Coyote Hills and I had to see about it. That well is now flowing at two thousand barrels and it’s paying me an income of five thousand dollars a week. I have two others drilling and I have sixteen producing at Antelope. So – ladies and gentlemen – if I say I’m an oil man, you will agree. You have a great chance here – but bear in mind: you can lose it all if you’re not careful. Out of all men that beg for a chance to drill your lots, maybe [only] one in twenty will be[, like me, an] oil [man]; the rest will be speculators – men trying to get *between* you and the oil men – to get some of the money that ought by rights come to you. Even if you find one that has money and means to drill, he’ll maybe know nothing about drilling and he’ll have to hire out the job on contract – and then you’re depending on a contractor that’s trying to rush the job through – so he can get another contract just as a quick as he can. [See,] This is the way that this works.”

“We beg you, Holy One, let us go into those pigs where we may still have life. You may have this one man back – spare us and we will spare this one.” The disciples take two steps back from Jesus as Jesus takes a step toward the madman. He turns his head toward the herd of swine, and returns his gaze to the flashing eyes. “Go, then,” Jesus says. The man convulses, his body twitching, his mouth foaming. There is a cut, and the pigs begin to snort and toe the dirt until – without warning – they rush down a steep bank and hurl themselves off the precipice and into the lake where, squealing, they drown.

“When the swineherds saw what had happened, they ran off and told it in the city and in the country. Then people came out to see what had happened, and when they came to Jesus, they found the man from whom the demons had gone sitting at the feet of Jesus, clothed and in his right mind. And they were afraid.”

It is now 1922, and there is a mansion of impossible finery: marble floors and stone walls, thirty-foot ceilings and an indoor swimming pool. Clutching a nearly empty bottle of whiskey, Daniel Plainview stumbles into a bowling alley in the basement of this, his home. He leans against the wall, slumps to the floor, and passes out. Now raising himself to all fours, with blood on his hands he howls like a madman among the tombs: “I took what I wanted when you weren’t looking and the blood of the lamb is in my [fat] pocket...I am the third revelation! I am who the Lord has chosen...I am older and [I am] wiser and I am not a false prophet...”

Painting with the macabre, these stories employ hyperbole to communicate their truth and to announce their warning. As the film begins, Daniel Plainview’s bad luck is so terrific – his mule dead, his water spil’d, his leg broke – that only supernatural strength, courage, and determination can save him. Such supernal gifts – born from below as were these – such gifts come to take their toll on his spirit, for Daniel’s fortune arrives with a price. Along the way to wealth, he parcels out his integrity for the sake of acquisition. So many times he had enough. So many roads he could have taken. But he does not. Daniel’s great strength becomes his great

selfishness; his courage becomes his recklessness; and his determination becomes his insatiable greed, his ravenous appetite consuming him, until there is no Daniel at all, but only the sin itself, still thirsting, still hungry for more.

Similarly, the character of the Gerasene Demoniac's healing suggests that his madness is not congenital, but chosen. That is to say, he is not by chemistry a schizophrenic or a manic depressive as we would name such disorders today, but, bit by bit, moment by moment, sin by sin, he has become the embodiment of offense against the God of Life. Perhaps his madness began modest, when he coddled a treasured vice only when no one was looking and only when he really needed a little something extra. And then, as his madness grew, he did not know a day without his precious vice, for, after all, he deserved such a luxury for all that he did. And then, in the end, he did not anymore indulge his vice, but became the vice itself, became the very indulgence itself. Eventually, he took to the tombs, gave up his home and his bed for a cushion of dead man's bones.

The narrative curve of *There Will Be Blood* has no upturn. There is no rising action, climax, and comfortable dénouement as we have come to expect in our American cinema. Rather, the descent of Daniel's soul is unrelenting and unchanging: down and down and down, worse and worse and worse, warning that we do not have to take up residence among the tombs to find ourselves making a life in death.

Jesus' healing of the Gerasene Demoniac teaches that sin such as this must be excised from our lives entirely – cut away – cast out like a demon into a pig. If we are to have life, then we must turn away from death, and turn away entirely. As C.S. Lewis writes, "If we insist on keeping Hell (or even Earth) we shall not see Heaven: if we accept Heaven we shall not be able to retain even the smallest and most intimate souvenirs of Hell." Those intimate souvenirs of Hell are like shadows in the City of Light: there they cannot exist.

With what indulgent souvenirs do we fill our pockets? What bit of this broken world do we seek to take with us across the threshold of death? What vice do we coddle with the lights turned low, when it can't hurt anyone but ourselves?

People of God: don't be fooled...*don't be fooled!* Such indulgence will never fill us. Such indulgence will only leave us hungry for more, and hungry not for more good, but for more sin, for more of that death by which we're dying.

Consider the transformation of the madmen and take heart: he was naked, and Jesus clothed him; he was wild, and Jesus made him well; he was feral, and Jesus made him faithful. Jesus brings this man out of the tombs where there was no hope, and makes of him life...*life*. For a darkening world, by Christ the Demoniac becomes the very Gift of Light.

As Lewis concludes, "I believe, to be sure, that any man who reaches Heaven will find that what he abandoned...the kernel of what he was really seeking – even in his most depraved wishes – [the kernel of that desire] will be there, beyond expectation, waiting for him in 'the High Countries.' In that sense it will be true of those who have completed the journey...to say that good is everything and Heaven is everywhere" (Lewis 8-9).

Heal us, O Lord: may we want what you want, and live in your life. Amen.