

Luke 8, Gerasenes demoniac, June 2019

This morning we have arguably one of the oddest and most memorable stories within the Gospels before us. Not only does it involve an exorcism, which is always somewhat foreign to our 21<sup>st</sup> century ears, but in this case it involves a herd of swine tumbling over a cliff to their death as well, which is another thing most of us don't encounter every day. The group of clergy gathered on Wednesday morning breakfast at the New London Café to discuss this text were our usual irreverent selves. As we discussed the strange behavior of these pigs and the loss their plunge into the water represented to the ancient pork industry, it was immediately noted how many of us were indulging in pig at that very moment between our breakfast meats of bacon or ham. Pork, as you may or may not know, is "the other white meat" and it is, in fact, the most frequently consumed meat on the planet, even with Jews and Muslims abstaining. For a good number of us, our relationship with pigs is primarily a combination of our experiences with ham, bacon, or barbecued ribs and possibly having read or seen the story of Charlotte's Web somewhere along the way. Our relationship to exorcisms is likely also limited to things we've read or watched in movies rife with over-the-top special effects. All of which means this text, written about 2000 years ago and set in a completely different culture, place, and time than our own, seems pretty far removed from us. And maybe even rather scary. The question I will ask you to keep in mind as we explore it is one we will answer by the end of the next 12 or so minutes, namely: Who is the *scariest* person in this story?

This *is* a scary story. To me it has all the dark elements of some Gothic horror novel....ceteries, insanity, darkness, chains. It could be skillfully and eerily presented in a

theatrical manner or on film. We'd be introduced to this character of the demoniac, the man of Gerasenes, who is possessed by a demon. Perhaps we'd see some flashbacks to his former life, where he may have been a respectable man with wife and family and work. But now he lives among the tombs, often in chains, but other times breaking free even from the chains in his crazed mania. He wears no clothes, he has no friends. His is a miserable existence and he's a pretty scary guy. We learn that he is possessed not just by one demon; which would be bad enough. Not even is he possessed by 7 demons, as we read was the case for Mary of Magdala. No, he is possessed by a Legion of demons..... and a legion could be as many as 6000 soldiers, and that's a lot of demons. This is a case where "more isn't better", more is worse. This poor wretch of a man is truly troubled and tormented, and he's the first man Jesus meets when he crosses the Sea of Galilee into this Greek dominated area of Geneserat.

Yes, Jesus and his disciples have left the comfort zone of the Jewish country of Palestine and ventured across the sea into Gentile territory. He is among people who are likely the worshippers of many gods and have little or no knowledge of the one Lord. Certainly they likely have no knowledge of Jesus, who is starting to build quite a reputation back in Palestine as a miracle worker and teacher. So, who is the first person he and his disciples meet when they embark on shore? A naked, raving lunatic! How's that for a friendly welcome to a new town? Surely their Chamber of Commerce could have come up with a better kind of Welcome Wagon! But wait, how is it that this crazy, naked, raving lunatic is the first to greet him when he comes ashore and also seems to know who he is? We see here the same pattern we see in most of the recorded exorcisms in the Gospels, which is that the demonic powers always recognize the Godliness of Christ. This is apparently true for two reasons: the evil recognizes the good, and in

a battle between the forces of good and evil, each side attempts to control the other by naming them. The demons Christ encounters attempt to control him and protect themselves by calling out his name; but they always fail in this attempt. Notice that Jesus will ask this tormented soul what his name is, which is part of the ritual---the naming of the force to be expelled. Typical exorcists of the day might also make an image of the one possessed and destroy it, as we might associate with voodoo, and they had elaborate rituals as part of the rite of exorcism. Jesus isn't a typical exorcist and he doesn't do any of that. He usually simply commands the demons to depart, and they do. Unique to this instance, the demons negotiate with Jesus a new resting place, within a herd of nearby swine. Were we back in Palestine, there would be no herds of swine; Jews considered pigs to be unclean animals. But here in Geneset, Gentile territory, pork is eaten freely, and most likely these pigs belong to a man of some wealth who has hired a swineherd to look after them. But that local pork industry is about to take a hit. The demons enter the pigs and in a panic, the herd of swine run off the cliff into the lake and drown. Tough on the demons, tough on the pigs, and tough on the swineherd, who has just seen his job disappear in a way that had to be seen to be believed. We can easily imagine him running into town to make his report, as our text records, his first words to his employer probably being: "You're not going to believe what happened! It wasn't my fault!"

We come then, in our text, to the happy ending. Except it's a little more complicated than that, isn't it? Things have improved dramatically for the poor wretch who began as the one possessed. He is now completely changed: clothed, rather than naked; sitting and calm, rather than running amok; "in his right mind" rather than bezerk; and sitting at the feet of Jesus, rather than off by himself. The man has been healed and freed. Which seems like the happy ending,

except the crowd doesn't seem to think so, do they? Their reaction is one of fear. When they see what has happened, we are told, "they were afraid". So much so, in fact, that we read, "they asked Jesus to leave them, for they were seized with great fear." Shouldn't this story end differently? Shouldn't they be rejoicing, thanking God or even their multiple gods, and begging Jesus to remain and make some other changes for the good? But, no, they were terrified rather than glad. Which answers the initial question I raised: who is the scariest person in this story? Is it the demoniac, the raving lunatic possessed by demons? Apparently not. The people of the area had tolerated him for years, albeit not in their homes, but in the vicinity. They'd never sent *him* away; they'd grown used to his deranged behavior. No, it's *Jesus* who is the scariest person in this story. He is so frightening that they beg him to leave immediately. The man who has just healed a tormented soul is far scarier than the demonically possessed man ever was. What's up with that?

For that matter, what do we make of this whole demonic possession business? We don't have the same world view, generally speaking, as more primitive societies did when it comes to this issue. Most scholars concur that mental illness and some forms of physical illness, like epilepsy for example, were understood to be a result of demonic possession. And think what it must have meant to have such an illness in such a time! There was no understanding of the physical, chemical roots of the illness; there were no drugs available for treatment; there was no psychiatric counseling; no support groups as we'd understand them. Mental illness continues to be unfairly stigmatized in our day and age, but it was *truly* so in the ancient world. We might well understand the phenomena ascribed to demonic possession in *that* day as an aspect of mental illness in *our own* day. And consider the three hallmarks of demonic possession as

presented in the Gospels: the one possessed was often self-destructive. They felt trapped and unable to free themselves. And they were separated from family and community by their condition. All three of those aspects are present in today's text: the man is self destructive, he is trapped, and he is exiled to the tombs, for all effects and purposes. But aren't those three hallmarks also a remarkable description of what often happens to those with mental illnesses yet today? They may be self-destructive, even suicidal; they may feel trapped and unable to overcome their affliction; they often end up alienated from family and community. Many of the homeless, in fact, appear to have mental health issues of some kind. Those ragged folks wandering the streets today with untreated schizophrenia or homeless veterans with PTSD may not be so different from this man in our text.

Furthermore, this description easily fits those struggling with powerful addictive behaviors as well. The meth addict, the alcoholic, also find themselves in a self-destructive spiral, unable to overcome their addiction, and alienated from those they formerly loved. Often people with chemical abuse issues also may have mental health issues and the other way around, too. So, although we might name these situations differently now, the descriptive impact is actually still quite similar. A destructive force beyond the control of the victim causes this devastation. There is a longing for freedom, for that force to be expelled or, if you will, exorcised. We accomplish that today through medications, psychiatric counseling, addiction recovery programs, and so on, many of which have a spiritual component. Jesus accomplished it through the power of his word and presence, naming the evil and commanding it to be gone. We might take note of the power of naming in this whole process, too. Naming the evil was a common part of such exorcising rituals. To this day, naming what is happening in one ill or

addicted is still crucial. Very rarely can we successfully treat a mental illness or an addiction that hasn't been named and acknowledged. Even on a larger, systemic level, we often need to name and acknowledge things like racism or ageism or sexism before we can effectively seek to exorcise them from a culture or situation. In that day and in our own, naming and acknowledging the problem is a crucial component towards healing.

Jesus does all that. He names the Legion and sends them on their way, to their destruction, via the pigs, one of those quirky parts of the Scriptures at which we can only marvel. But a man has been freed and healed! The word for "healed", *sozo* in Greek, can mean healed, saved, delivered, or made whole. All of that applies to the man in this story. Given all that, then, why isn't this exorcism-slash-healing a happy ending for all involved? To return to our original question, why is *Jesus* the scariest person in this story? Isn't it good news that God has power over evil or illness, however we might understand it? The man in this text is deeply and genuinely changed, there could hardly be a more dramatic contrast in the before and after pictures in this instance, and the factor that turned the "before" into the "after" was an encounter with the power of God in the person of Christ. I think that our belief that deep and abiding change is possible is one of the most radical elements of the Christian faith. Such change, in people or systems, is incredibly difficult to achieve. Shouldn't those around this man be rejoicing at this change? Why do they fear it rather than celebrate it?

Let's see if we can understand by putting ourselves into their position. They are familiar with the man in our story as a demoniac. They have figured out how to isolate him, to literally chain him up at times, how to avoid him, how to ignore him. He is a misery that has become

familiar. To then witness him so dramatically changed is a terrible shock, at the very least. What about the aftermath? Does he successfully re-integrate into the society? Do his wife and children welcome him back with open arms or are they too bitter, or will they take him back but always have trouble trusting him? What about all the bad feelings he probably provoked while in his ill phase? Did he leave his family destitute, did he shame his parents with his behavior? Did he do wrong by his friends and associates? Can all these forget and forgive? Not really so simple to change and accept change, is it?

Certainly we still might experience that with those in recovery from a mental illness or addictive behavior today. How long does someone have to be sober before their estranged family members truly trust their sobriety? How long will it take to pay off credit card debt that may have accumulated during the illness or addiction? Will there be a job available? Many 12 step programs take into account the need to essentially confess and be forgiven, to make amends for damage done. But that's not easy, either for the one recovering or those hurt by the illness or addiction beforehand. Change isn't always welcome or easy, not when we've become accustomed to living to the old, bad ways. And if anyone stands as an agent of change, it's Jesus. We might think of Paul's profound statement: "If anyone is in Christ, they are a new creation; the old order has passed away; everything has become new!" That's potent change---no wonder the people are terrified of him!

Nevertheless, given even the fear and risk that change engenders, aren't you glad the story ended as it did? Would we rather have seen Jesus ignore the demoniac, leave him be in his misery and illness, so as to not rock the boat or cause a ruckus by returning him, healed and

whole, back to his community? I can't believe we would. We couldn't love and worship a God Incarnate Who would act like that. And we couldn't trust our own healing, redemption, and salvation to a Christ who doesn't have both a heart filled with compassion and the power to effect change, healing, and new life. Christ still stands at the sides of the ill, beside the recovering addict, beside the wandering homeless mentally ill person who is still lost. Just as he stands beside us, in all of our brokenness. There is no place God's compassion and power do not extend and sometimes we are the recipients of that compassion and power, and sometimes we are the vehicles for that compassion and power to do good for someone else. Here's what Jesus urges the one healed to do: "Return to your home and declare how much God has done for you." What if he asks the same of us? You don't necessarily have to travel to foreign lands or find difficult and exotic challenges for Christ's sake. Simply, "return to your home and declare how much God has done for you." A declaration we might make through word or action. Thanks be to God. Amen.