

Pentecost 2, June 23, 2019 (Lk 8:26-39; Gal 3:23-29; Is 65:1-9, Ps 22:19-28)

This is a teaching sermon. I want to talk about how people would have heard the gospel story when it was first told, things that aren't clear to us today. I'll go straight through the text.

- The story takes place in **the region of the Gerasenes**. The original Greek says it was **opposite Galilee**. *Opposite* was true not only in location (across the lake), but also in every other way. It was gentile, not Jewish, country, so their entire way of life was different from that of Jesus and the disciples.

In Luke's gospel, this was Jesus' first trip into gentile territory, the first time he crossed geographic boundaries in his mission to offer salvation to non-Jews.

- The **demon-possessed man** was *unclean* in every sense. His behavior was uncontrolled and uncontrollable. He wore no clothing—and nakedness was considered unlawful. He was living **among the tombs**, the resting place of the dead; and any contact with the dead *of any species* was a cause of uncleanness.
- When Jesus spoke to the man, the demons were the ones who answered, shouting loudly, **What do you want with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God?** The *demons* recognized who Jesus was—in fact, in all the gospels, with one exception, it's *only* the demons who name Jesus as the Son of God.

There's irony in this text, because the *demons* recognize Jesus and his disciples don't. Immediately before this story, Jesus was asleep in the boat. A storm came up. Terrified, the disciples woke him, saying, **Master, Master, we're going to drown!**

Jesus *rebuked* the wind and the waters—the same word used to cast out demons—and the disciples, filled with fear and amazement, asked each other, **Who is this man? Even the winds and the waves obey him.**

- The name given by the man was *Legion*. People would have thought of Roman military troops. The Romans had been in power over the Jews for a hundred years; a *legion* consisted of 6000 soldiers. (That would be a lot of demonic voices in the head of this poor gentile man!)
- The demons begged Jesus not to send them into **the Abyss**. The Greek word *abusson* means *very deep* or *bottomless*, and it's used to translate the Hebrew word for *bottomless void*. That's what the Jews believed existed before **God created the heavens and the earth** in Genesis. It was commonly believed that this was where evil spirits and demonic hordes lived.
- **The demons begged Jesus to let them go into the pigs.** Pigs, of course, were considered *unclean*. (And, according to my colleague Brian Stoffregen, this is "the first recorded case of *deviled ham*"!)
- In this story Jesus used his healing power to restore a child of God who was outcast in every respect: physical, mental, emotional, social, and spiritual. But he hadn't *overwhelmed* the demons—the most powerful enemy people could imagine. He had simply commanded them with a word.
- The people who lived in that area **went out to see what had happened**. They must have been totally astonished at the sight of the formerly-demon-possessed man **sitting at Jesus' feet, clothed and in his right mind**.

And **they were overcome with fear**. With a word he had disrupted the status-quo of their comfortable life. Worse yet, if Jesus had that kind of power over demons, what might he do to *them*? (Remember, they were gentiles. Gentiles were as unclean to Jews as were pigs!)

That's probably how the early Christians understood this story when Luke first told it. For us today, the idea of "demon possession" sounds primitive, sort of like believing in a flat world. We can't understand the *terror* of living with or among demons.

But *evil* is as real today as it was 2000 years ago. We've seen the raw power of evil in Putin's invasion of Ukraine, sex-trafficking, the epidemic of shootings in all parts of the country, cruel use of governmental power under which innocent people struggle and die, the catastrophic effects of greed and selfishness on the part of heartless big business.

Today people may be possessed by addiction to drugs, alcohol, gambling. We have obsessions, destructive habits, unbearable fears. Like the demons of the gospel, these can destroy people physically, mentally, emotionally, socially, and spiritually.

But Jesus is always more powerful than any demons we know or can imagine. And as Jesus told the man in the gospel to **go and tell**, Jesus also calls *us* to tell others what God has done for us.

The gospel story isn't just about a miraculous healing—it's the story of one man's *calling*, and *sending*. When the man wanted to go with Jesus, he was told, instead, to stay at home and tell everyone what God had done for him.

There's no more powerful witness in the world than the personal testimony of God's healing in your own life. There's no more persuasive evangelism than being on fire for God because of what God has done for you. Ministry happens whenever and wherever the people of God tell others how God has been active in their lives.

Christianity is more than just coming to church to *receive* from Jesus and to praise God in community. It also involves returning to the world where we live, work, and play, and declaring our experiences with God.

The rest of Luke's gospel will invite and compel us to follow Jesus, not for *our* sake, but for the sake of the world—including those we perceive as different, unworthy, unacceptable, even scary. Because *those* are the people—just like us—Jesus came to die for.

I want to share with you an on-line devotional that came to me last week from Luther Seminary in the Twin Cities. This was written by Mary Simonson Clark.

Have you ever been so embarrassed by failure or ashamed over a fault that you wanted to crawl in a hole and pull it in after yourself? I've felt that way! I didn't want anyone to notice me or what I'd done. The possessed man cried, "What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God?" These words reveal painful shame, fear, and despair. Jesus heard the cry. He chose to notice the man, stop, and ask, "What is your name?" Jesus demonstrated that seeking someone's name may lessen their embarrassment or shame, and show genuine concern. Jesus compassionately calls us by name when he chooses us to become his siblings. With Jesus' call, God saves us from separation's abyss. God doesn't leave us hiding in a hole. Instead, God chooses to crawl in the hole alongside us to restore us into relationship with Godself (Mary Simonson Clark, '07, M.A./MSW, God Pause for Thursday, June 16, 2022).

Thanks be to God!