

“In the Country of the Gerasenes”

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First Scripture Reading: Philippians 4:4-9

⁴Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. ⁵Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. ⁶Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. ⁷And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. ⁸Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. ⁹Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.

Second Scripture Reading: Luke 8:26-39

²⁶Then they arrived at the country of the Gerasenes, which is opposite Galilee. ²⁷As he stepped out on land, a man of the city who had demons met him. For a long time he had worn no clothes, and he did not live in a house but in the tombs. ²⁸When he saw Jesus, he fell down before him and shouted at the top of his voice, “What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I beg you, do not torment me” — ²⁹for Jesus had commanded the unclean spirit to come out of the man. (For many times it had seized him; he was kept under guard and bound with chains and shackles, but he would break the bonds and be driven by the demon into the wilds.) ³⁰Jesus then asked him, “What is your name?” He said, “Legion”; for many demons had entered him. ³¹They begged him not to order them to go back into the abyss. ³²Now there on the hillside a large herd of swine was feeding; and the demons begged Jesus to let them enter these. So he gave them permission. ³³Then the demons came out of the man and entered the swine, and the herd rushed down the steep bank into the lake and was drowned. ³⁴When the swineherds saw what had happened, they ran off and told it in the city and in the country. ³⁵Then 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. ³⁶Those who had seen it told them how the one who had been possessed by demons had been healed. ³⁷Then all the people of the surrounding country of the Gerasenes asked Jesus to leave them; for they were seized with great fear. So he got into the boat and returned. ³⁸The man from whom the demons had gone begged that he might be with him; but Jesus sent him away, saying, ³⁹“Return to your home, and declare how much God has done for you.” So he went away, proclaiming throughout the city how much Jesus had done for him.



Sermon: “In the Country of the Gerasenes”

Stories in the Bible about demon possession and evil spirits can be hard to read and take seriously. Today, ghosts and spirits have for the most part been relegated to the realm of fiction and generally find their place in horror movies and campfire stories. There was a time when knowledge of the body and science was limited and so conditions that are fairly common today, would have seemed mysterious - even just a couple of centuries ago.

At the time of Luke’s writing, people knew precious little about epilepsy or mental illness. So epileptic seizures, erratic behaviors associated with schizophrenia, and personality disorders might well have been explained as the tormenting of a spirit taking control of the victim’s body. But today we have a greater understanding and we’re more likely to examine the body for the source of our maladies and less likely to attribute physical ailments to spiritual possession.

But if you dismiss the reality of evil spirits, you still have to explain why Jesus spoke of them and acted to cast them out. I’ve always liked the way William Barclay addresses this issue. In his “Daily Study Bible Series” commentary on Mark, Barclay says there are essentially two possibilities here:

“(1) We may relegate the whole matter of demon possession to the sphere of primitive thought and say that it was a primitive way of accounting for things in the days before [we] knew any more about [the human body] and [the human mind]. (2) We may accept demon-possession as being true in New Testament times and as being still true today. (3) If we accept the first position we have to explain the attitude and actions of Jesus. Either he knew no more on this matter than the people of his day, and that is a thing we can easily accept for Jesus was not a scientist and did not come to teach science. Or he knew perfectly well that he could never cure a man in trouble unless he assumed the reality of the disease. It was real to the [person] and had to be treated as such or it could never be cured.”¹

So, whether the Gerasene man in our story today was demon-possessed or not, the people of the time believed he was, and Luke believed he was when he wrote down the story. It’s also worth noting that Luke never says that the man reports

being demon-possessed. That is the diagnosis given by the townspeople to Jesus and by Luke to his readers. But if we saw that man today, we would be able to recognize his behavior as that of a man in the throes of mental illness.

Luke tells us that he had stopped wearing clothes long ago, lived not in a house, but among the tombs, and experienced spells where he would lose control of himself and run away into the wilderness. Most importantly he describes himself as not an individual, but as multiple people.

The website for the Mayo Clinic defines Schizophrenia as “a serious mental disorder in which people interpret reality abnormally. Schizophrenia may result in some combination of hallucinations, delusions, and extremely disordered thinking and behavior that impairs daily functioning and can be disabling.”²

Doesn't that sound like the man in our story?

There's another good example of this in the gospel according to Mark. In Chapter 9 we find the story of a boy whose father believes him to be possessed by a demon. The “demon” dashes the boy to the ground and causes him to foam at the mouth, grind his teeth and become rigid. In the presence of Jesus, the boy goes into convulsions and his father reports that sometimes “it” throws him into the fire.

Those are many of the classic hallmarks of a tonic-clonic (grand mal) seizure. The father believed him to be possessed but it sounds more like the boy had epilepsy.

Getting back to our story, whatever the man's torment, whether demon-possession or mental illness, Jesus is able to heal him. And the man is grateful; joyful. Jesus has given him his life back. We might expect there to be a celebration. At the very least, people should be grateful they will no longer have to deal with a naked man running wild in the cemetery during funerals. But Luke tells us the locals aren't excited for the miracle they have witnessed; they are *afraid*; not joyful, not amazed; *afraid*.

Now, we wouldn't necessarily expect *everyone* to be happy about what has happened here. The farmer who owned the pigs Jesus sends rushing off to their deaths by the dozens; he would probably have been pretty irate. But in the world of Jewish thought and tradition from which Luke is writing, you're not going to find a whole lot of sympathy for pigs and pig farmers.

But Luke doesn't really go into all of that. He says the people who witness this miracle, go into town and tell others. When the townspeople come out to see for themselves, they find the man they had always known as a naked, demon-possessed, wild man, sitting at Jesus' feet, dressed, and in his right mind, and they are afraid. What a curious reaction to such a miracle.

Now maybe they are overwhelmed by Jesus' acts of supernatural power. Matthew tells us that at least once, the Pharisees accused Jesus of being able to cast-out demons because he was one himself. So maybe the people were scared of Jesus' power, attributing it to Satan rather than to God. But it could be something else.

You see, this man was not a stranger to them. He was probably born and raised in that area so folks would have known him and his family; they would have known his history. They would have watched him grow up and witnessed his slow slide into mental illness. One would expect that finding him well and in his right mind would have brought some joy to the community. But Luke tells us that they were *afraid*, and they asked Jesus to leave.

Commentator David Lose argues it was because Jesus was changing the norms of a society they had gotten used to. He writes: “Jesus' power and presence disrupts the social order ... they are alarmed when the former demoniac comes once again among them, even though he has been cured, because the social order to which they have become accustomed is utterly upset.”³

You would have a hard time making the case that this man's affliction was beneficial, either to him or to the community, but it was the way things were and they had grown accustomed to it. Perhaps the townspeople did not trust that this man was completely healed. Perhaps the taint of having been possessed was always on him and no one wanted to live next door to the guy that used to be possessed; the weirdo, the scary man who used to wander the graveyard, hollering and screaming in the night. Jesus' power does not just heal him, it returns him to the community. But the community doesn't seem interested in having him back.

Before Jesus, this man was sick and homeless. Cast out by his community, he found refuge in the cemetery. He is *figuratively* dead and left to live out his days amongst the *literal* dead. And he is not alone. Jesus spends a great deal of time reaching out to and walking with people that have been pushed to the margins by their communities. Making this

demon-possessed outcast a priority, healing him, making him whole, that is a sign of the way Jesus values those who have been discriminated against, devalued, and who have not just fallen between the cracks, but have been forcefully stuffed into those cracks, all the better to be ignored and forgotten.

What kind of world is it where we can't just ostracize (and in this man's case, literally demonize) people with whom we are uncomfortable? It's a world that Jesus is changing as he ushers in the Kingdom of God.

And if there's one thing we know from experience, it's that the wheels of social change turn slowly.

These people are being asked to accept something they do not understand. They will need to do the work of being vulnerable; of opening themselves up to the limitations of their understanding; to recognize that Jesus is doing a new thing among them and asking them to accept that what they have always known is not how things actually are. It is human nature to grow comfortable with our own worldview. But just because we've always seen things a certain way, does not mean that our way of seeing has always been right.

We see Jesus do so much in the gospels; things that are truly miraculous. In this same chapter of Luke, just before arriving in Gerasa, Jesus calmed a storm while he and the disciples were crossing the Sea of Galilee.⁴ So we see that Jesus has the power to change the weather and to cast out demons. But apparently the real challenge for Jesus is changing the hearts of people.

The gospel is always to us comfort and challenge. The comfort here is the power of God in Christ to heal and to reconcile and make whole. It is the willingness of God to work on our hearts and urge us, push us, and change us into the people God has created us to be.

But there is also challenge. As God expands our knowledge and understanding of the world, we must be open to what God is showing us, even if that is different from what we thought we knew before. Culturally, we tend to resist change, or at least what we perceive to be too much change or change that occurs too quickly. It's why older folks think the young haven't lived long enough to know anything and it's why younger folks think the old are "stuck in their ways." This church has been surprisingly open to a large number of changes in recent years. But you'll still get a fight if you try to change the carpet color.

We're seeing great changes in our society today. Many of them important changes that move us closer to the Kingdom of God where, as Luke writes, they shall "come from east and west, and from north and south, and sit at table in the kingdom of God."⁵

But there is also a great deal of resistance to these changes. How tragic it is when the liberation of people, is met not with joy but suspicion and fear. How sinful when a people are set free from oppression but all we can focus on is how the world is changing and how that change might impact our own lives.

We see that now in the fearful and punitive reactions to immigrants coming to this country, long a beacon of freedom and opportunity to the world. And we are not alone, many people in Europe and the Middle East have put up barriers to those immigrants and refugees who flee war and oppression seeking safety, and a better life.

Earlier in Luke's gospel, he reports Jesus standing before the Temple and reading from Isaiah 61:

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, ¹⁹to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."⁶

"Today," Jesus says, "this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."⁷

Luke tells us that the people listening to him that day were concerned less about the good news he proclaimed, and more about what they saw as his own blasphemy. But I wonder if they weren't also just not ready to see the poor receive good news, the captives released, or the oppressed go free. Because of how those changes might affect **them**?

Certainly, that good news has been resisted in this country by folks who just weren't ready for it.

During the women's suffrage movement in the early 20th century, many people resisted because it was seen not as liberty or acknowledging the rights of women, but as a frightening change to the status quo.

During the Civil Rights movement of the sixties, many people pushed back against equal rights for African-Americans out of fear of what it would change.

Today, as Gay, Lesbian, Bi-sexual and Transgendered people are increasingly free to own their identities - to be set free from the bondage imposed upon them by fear and hatred and ignorance - we hear again the choruses from some in the community that warn of the danger of too much change.

For some people, change is hard. I know I like some things to remain the same. The reason being that I'd rather have what I know, than something I don't. I like my children now, I may not like them so much after they grow-up and become actual people with opinions and stuff. We moved to Ohio six and a-half years ago and that was hard because when you move, everything changes: new barber, new street names, new restaurants, even the pizza is cut differently up here. I still don't know what's up with that.

And big changes in society can be especially challenging. Presbyterians always say we are reformed and always being reformed by God. And that is true of the world around us, too. What we are today is not the end of what we will be. God is not finished with us yet. When I graduated high school, I thought I was done. I had a piece of paper that said so. When I graduated college, I thought I was done. I had a piece of paper that said so. When I graduated seminary, I wasn't quite sure if I was done, in spite of the new piece of paper they gave me. Then I became a pastor. Then I got married. Then I became a father. And I am still learning and growing and becoming the person God intends me to be.

And that is the thing about God's change. It is all a process moving us toward the Kingdom of God. We don't change ourselves for the sake of changing. We listen for God. And I believe what God is telling us today is that the time for closing doors, building walls, rejecting those fleeing persecution, pushing out people we see as "different," and living in fear of one another is done. And we can pat ourselves on the back and say that in this church we don't do those things; that we are welcoming and open, and this house is a safe place for all who enter, but the world is bigger than this congregation.

God didn't send Jesus to start a new church. God sent Jesus to advance the Kingdom and change the world. And the church has to be an instrument of that kingdom-building change. If this church is a safe place for all, in a community that isn't, then we aren't finished. There is work yet to be done. And we are called to do it.

We are in the country of the Gerasenes. Change is our reality. And through that change, God is doing amazing things. In the midst of upheaval and a shifting culture there is newfound freedom and liberation. In the midst of creeping fear and alienation, there is light and love and welcome. And in the midst of it all, we train our gaze upon God, watching for God's action, listening for God's voice and seeking God's will.

And whatever God brings, we will be joyful. We will be amazed. We will be astounded. But we will not be afraid.

To God be all glory, honor, power, and dominion, in this world and in the world that is to come. Amen.

End Notes

¹ Barclay, William. *The Gospel of Mark*. Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975. 36. Print. Daily Study Bible Ser.

² "Schizophrenia - Symptoms and causes." Mayo Clinic, 10 Apr. 2018, www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/schizophrenia/symptoms-causes/syc-20354443.

³ Lose, David J. "Luke 8:26-39, Homiletical Perspective." *Feasting on the Word: Year C, Volume 3*. Ed. David Lyon Bartlett and Barbara Brown. Taylor. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008. 169. Print.

⁴ Luke 8:22-25, NRSV

⁵ Luke 13:29, RSV

⁶ Luke 4:18-19, NRSV

⁷ Luke 4:21, NRSV