

Sermon - Luke 8:26-39  
Healing of a Demon-possessed Man  
By Kate Parker

Jesus and his crew have been traveling across the land as Jesus has been teaching a string of parables. Just in this chapter alone, our story is preceded by the Parable of the Sower, A Lamp on a Stand. And now we enter a sequence of four miracles. The first of which happens just before our story today.

After their long trek, Jesus prompts the group to jump into a boat and go across the lake. The boat ride lulls Jesus to sleep. Then a storm begins to brew. The boat fills with water and the disciples perceive danger. They wake Jesus, who can I just say is possibly the worlds' heaviest sleeper, to sleep through what appears to be a chaotic storm? Although, as a brief aside, I get a kick out thinking of the disciples as bad as a bunch of Californians. {A moderate breeze and a few sprinkles and everyone is like "OMG, we're going to die! Ah! (hand to forehead) we're perishing!!"} }

But surely that wasn't the case, surely.☺ The disciples were clearly freaked out and wake Jesus up, shouting at him. He wakes up, calmly rebukes the wind and raging waves, and once again peace resumes. With the wind's rebuke, Jesus turns to them with what feels like a scolding tone. "Where is your faith?" The scene ends with what we can only imagine are the disciples wide-eyed and mouths gaping open. "Who then is this, that he commands even the winds and water and they obey him?". And one answer to this question comes with what follows.

Now we transition to our story for today. This passage says they arrived in Garasa, the country of the Garasenes. This story is reflected in all gospels but John, each with its own variation. Mark and Luke agree that this is the location. Matthew tells the story differently, indicating that two demoniacs that approach them in the country of Gadara. Both locations are slightly problematic because neither are "on the other side" of the sea of Galilee. Some historians think there was another town called Gergesa and perhaps it just got mis-translated over time. Regardless of the location this was most likely Gentile territory.

Still in a stupor from what they just experienced, the boat reaches land. Let's take a quick pan across the scene...They are among tombs (unclean). There are pigs (unclean). Remember, the Jews were kosher and it was unclean for them to consume pork, further indicating that this was a Gentile village. Just being in the area Jesus is willingly stepping into an scene that could make them unclean by Jewish customs. Yet he does not waver nor hesitate. Again, exemplifying that God's love and God's word has no boundaries. No barriers.

They had no sooner put foot on land, than what most people would describe as a crazed maniac rushes at them; naked and shouting at the top of his lungs. Now imagine what your reaction would be. I imagine this to be one of those situations where one might do everything they can to avoid eye contact, perhaps side-stepping the spectacle, with your heart racing, seeking to increase distance between yourself and this human who seems to be out of control, hoping they'll leave you alone and unharmed. I mean we've all done it, right? Crossing to the other side of the street if you see someone who might feel a little risky or uncomfortable to be near? Not Jesus. No, he steps up and into the chaos, sees the root cause of the issue. This man's behavior was not guided by his choice alone. He was oppressed by something much greater/stronger than himself.

And one more thing is clear. This man had been put out of his community. Ostracized. Luke tells us that he was kept under guard, bound with chains and shackles. Mark tells us that there were attempts to restrain him, but he could not be restrained...no one had strength to subdue him. Night and day he would roam around the tombs and mountains, howling and bruising himself with stones. Matthew's version indicates that the demoniacs were so fierce that no one could pass by their dwelling among the tombs. His own people had banished him, not knowing how to deal with his behavior. He was too much for them.

Everyone of us in this room has experienced exclusion on some level. It hurts. It causes you to wonder what's wrong with you. What you've done. It causes you to doubt yourself. Psychologically, ostracism...exclusion has many negative consequences. Research indicates that it can cause lower levels of self-esteem, lower sense of belonging, it decreases ones sense of being in control, and can create a diminished sense of significance and value. Imagine what effect that can have on a the mind of someone who already suffers from troubling instability. That pain and shame on top of the frustration of having little control over oneself. But imagine if you had been cast so far out that you literally had no one and no place to call home, cast out to live among the dead. How agonizing!

The man runs up to Jesus, falls down, and shouts out "What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God???" I can't help but still hear echoes of the disciples' confusion on the boat "who is this, that even the wind and the water obey him??" They who have been traveling with him, listening to his teachings, where he has given many clues as to his identity and purpose. Yet in this moment, even what appears to be a raving lunatic picks up on the obvious and can understand the truth of who Jesus is; that he represents THE God that is the above all else, highest among the hierarchy of all gods.

He begs for mercy, not torment. Surely he's been tormented enough. Then with the greatest amount simplicity, Jesus cuts into the chaos and asks the most basic of questions: "What is your name?". He does not dismiss this man, as so many others have done before. He doesn't compartmentalize him as "the other". He doesn't fear him. He sees him as a child of God. Everyone, even the untouchable, need God's love...need the gospel and the healing it can provide. And the man answers, Legion, for many demons had entered him." In this moment, we find that his identity has been so fully consumed by his affliction...his pain... his darkness...his shame that he can't even make sense of his true self. He is now Legion.

We suddenly have a pronoun shift...After identifying "himself" as Legion, Luke shifts to reference him in the plural. "They begged him not to order them to go back to the abyss." It seems "they" know that Jesus is about to take action. Their time is up. They don't want to go to the Abyss, the deep, dark place where demons are supposedly confined. Our attention is pulled to the herd of swine. Mark's account indicates they were approximately 2000 in number. "They" ask Jesus to enter the herd. Jesus neither commands them or sends them, but rather just gives them permission to go there. His authority over them is clearly ultimate and superior. And a shocking site occurred and all the swine rushed into the water and drowned. It wouldn't be inappropriate to be reminded of Pharoah's army long ago perishing in the Red Sea. God once again performing an act of deliverance over evil.

Those tending the pigs ran off to tell everyone what had happened. Everyone rushed to the scene to see for themselves. Now, I have to imagine this took some amount of time. Maybe even a few hours! Wouldn't you like to know what transpired in that time? The ensuing conversation between the man who had been held captive for years, all of a sudden snapped back into true reality. Now healed, restored, basking in the glory of his savior. Wouldn't you like to know his real name?

Once the townspeople arrive they find the man...perhaps for the first time since he was a boy; clothed; in his right mind. And I find this fascinating. Their reaction wasn't one of joy over the reunification with one of their own, but of fear. They were afraid...Once again they hear the great testimony of what has happened and again it says they were "seized with great fear". As if they were under their own oppression. We all have our demons. This fear cannot hear, cannot see, and cannot celebrate the good news. And so they react in their fear, by asking Jesus to leave. Casting him away from the community just as they had their demon afflicted son. It seems the peoples' fear can't tell the difference between good and evil.

Fear is a powerful force. It's defined as an unpleasant emotion caused by belief that someone or something is dangerous, likely to cause pain or threat. Granted, fear is an important survival mechanism, and most of us are in this room today because fear kept us safe...kept us from doing things that might cause harm to our lives. So in many ways, fear is healthy. But sometimes and for some people it can spiral out of control.

I read an article in Psychology Today that explains it this way:

"Fear is part instinct, part learned, part taught.

Some fears are instinctive: Pain, for example, causes fear instinctively because of its implications for survival.

Other fears are learned: We learn to be afraid of certain people, places, or situations because of negative associations and past experiences.

Other fears are taught: Cultural norms often dictate whether something should be feared or not. Think, for example, about how certain social groups are feared and persecuted because of a society's created impression that they are dangerous." — 7 Things You Need to Know About Fear, Theo Tsaousides, Ph.D, Psychology Today

This last one is what worries me....even in the church. You see, fear can be contagious. Fear can cause division in community. Fear of the unclean, the other, people who aren't like "us". Fear can create chaos and confusion. Fear breeds fear. Fear makes us look away and put more and more things into the category labeled "Not My Problem". It gets infinitely more complicated when our political systems and the media try to tell us what to think and feel, categorizing things broadly into good vs. bad silos. You see, Jesus asks us to see the person. For who they are to God. A broken child in need of love.

It is my prayer that none of us play the role of these townspeople that are so seized by fear that we can't see Jesus and his purpose when it is right before us. May we not be too short-sighted to see God's potential for someone other than ourselves.

There was this great quote from TED Talk by Ingrid Betancourt, who said, "... obviously fear is contagious. But faith is, too. Faith isn't rational or emotional. Faith is an exercise of the will. It's the discipline of the will. It's what allows us to transform everything that we are - our weaknesses, our frailties, into strength, into power. It's truly a transformation. It's what gives us the strength to stand up in the face of fear look above it, and see beyond it." — What Six Years in Captivity Taught Me About Fear and Faith, Ingrid Betancourt, TED Talk

Let's conclude with the final scene of the story. The people ask Jesus to leave, so he gets into the boat. No coercion, no blame. He just honors them where they are. The healed man wanted to go with Jesus and his disciples. He has bonded with Jesus, being liberated by him. Maybe he was reluctant to go with the people who put him out of their midst long ago. Maybe he was afraid they wouldn't receive him back into their fold. But Jesus, always an advocate for reconciliation, turns him towards his people and sends him home to share the good news. If they weren't going to receive it from Jesus, perhaps they would from one of their own. So Jesus departs and we are told the man took that charge. Luke says he proclaims throughout the city how much Jesus had done for him. Mark's account says he proclaimed it all throughout the whole Decapolis and people were amazed.

Through one life changed, many benefitted. Many lives likely transformed.

Both individually and as a community we have great opportunity and dare I say, great responsibility to stand up against the demonic, oppressive forces in this world, particularly when it means for standing up for those

who are powerless to do so themselves. Some in the category of oppressed might invoke fear in us. Some might make us feel uncomfortable. We might want to avert our eyes, keep them cast out among the tombs, so that we're not inconvenienced. But if we do that, we are so missing out on the opportunity to witness the beauty of God's healing and restoration. And we might be robbing someone from experiencing it for themselves.

May we be a home for the afflicted and oppressed, that through us, they experience the power and liberation of God's love and be made whole. Amen.