

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 foreign to our 21st 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. After all, what do most of us know about pigs, except that they provide pork? Pork, as you may or may not know, is 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 about eating ham, bacon, or barbecued ribs and possibly having read 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 with a pre-scientific world view, seems far removed from us. And maybe quite dark and scary. Yet intriguing. The questions I would ask you to keep in mind as we explore this story are these: *Who is the scariest person* in this story, and *what is the scariest thing* that happens?

This *is* a scary story. To me it has all the dark elements of some Gothic horror novel....cemeteries, insanity, darkness, chains. We meet a crazed man who lives among the tombs, often in shackles, but other times breaking free even from the chains in his mania. He wears no clothes, he has no friends. He engages in self-harm, bruising himself on rocks while howling in his misery. His is a tormented existence. We learn that he is demon possessed, not by *one* demon, but by a *Legion* of demons---and a *legion* would immediately bring to mind a unit of 6000 Roman soldiers, the occupying troops of the area, to the people of Jesus' time. Could this story get any worse or seem any more distant from our experience?

Except maybe it *isn't* so far distant from us in every way. Even today, there are those among us who are tormented and causing harm to themselves or others. Those who are either forced into isolation or choose isolation. And sometimes we just don't know how to help them. In Jesus' time, all manner of illness, including mental illness, was attributed to demonic possession. We have more medically sophisticated ways to

understand such ailments, but when it comes to mental illness or addictions there is *still* a lack of understanding, a stigma is yet attached, and often we find great difficulty in discovering a successful treatment or way to promote healing. Any number of us know what it means to come to the end of our tether trying to assist ourselves or someone we love who struggles with an addiction or psychological illness; we understand the estrangement that can result, how such a person can be either rejected by others or choose their own self-exile. In these ways, the demoniac in our lesson is *not* quite so far out from our range of experience; if we have been in such situations personally, we know the intense unhappiness involved for both the one stricken and for those who care about them.

That's a bridge between us and this lesson on a *personal* level, but there is also a broader level of connection between us and this text. In our Gospel text, the demon involved gives the name of "Legion", which indicated both a large number of demons *but also* had political overtones of the hated occupying Roman soldiers, as mentioned already. Which gives this text a kind of political, systemic level of meaning as well as a personal level. Perhaps a contemporary equivalent of that name "Legion" for us would be if the name of "Gestapo" had been given--a feared, organized, secretive and deadly force within Nazi Germany; or the name "Terrorist cell"---again indicative of a powerful and deadly group. A more contemporary name like those might help *us* to recognize that Jesus wasn't just up against the evil or illness that *personally* made this individual man's life a misery, but that Jesus was also pushing back against *larger* forces of oppression that brought misery. In this instance, the Roman Legions. That double layer of meaning in this story made it all the more scary for the people of Christ's time, who knew what it meant to live in fear of a well-organized, powerful, potentially ruthless occupying force—as in the Roman legions in their countries. As 21st C. Americans, we don't live with *that* kind of fear, but I think we do understand some systemic fears that seem beyond our understanding or control, but that threaten us---maybe something like the Covid global pandemic, or maybe racism or large-scale threats to the environment. Scary forces beyond our control that nonetheless are a real and present threat to well-being. So, while we may not have direct one-to-one corollaries to this scary story, I think we nevertheless can understand the fear and misery represented by these circumstances, both personally

and on a larger scale. Strange and far-removed from us while this text might seem, in reality, it is a story which engages us.

Let's back up a moment to wonder *why* Jesus and his disciples are in this scary situation to begin with. Because they shouldn't be. Jesus leads his disciples out of the proper and comfortable zone of their Jewish country of Palestine and ventures with them across the sea into Gentile territory. Everyone living there was considered ritually unclean by the 1st C. Jews, and good Jews wouldn't have made this journey. But Jesus does. He's stretching his disciple's understanding of the breadth of God's mercy and forcing them to see first-hand these people they've avoided and branded as unworthy. The disciples are quite likely feeling uneasy to be doing this at all, and who is the first person they meet when they embark on shore? A naked, raving lunatic! A *demon-possessed* naked, raving, lunatic who also *knows already who Jesus is*. How can that be? 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 in the Gospels 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. And to engage in another moment of seeking contemporary equivalents for us, don't *we also* recognize the power of *naming* today? Of calling an illness or an addiction or a systemic evil by its true name, rather than living in denial? For example, isn't the first step to recovery from addiction an honest acknowledgement and naming of their addiction? There was and still is significant power in calling a thing by its true name, in naming scary realities. That's what Jesus does here. The demons are named, and Jesus commands them 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 swineherds to look after them. Perhaps this pork helped to feed those Roman occupying forces. 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. This not only was the end of the demons, it was the end of the pigs. It quite likely was also the end of the employment of the swineherds. Quite a few *endings* have happened, in fact.

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, begging Jesus to remain and make some other changes for the good? But, no, they were terrified rather than glad. Which answers the initial questions I raised: *who* is the scariest person in this story, and *what* is the scariest thing that happens? Is the scariest person the demoniac? Apparently not. The people of the area had tolerated him for years 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 tormented soul ever was. And the scariest *thing* that happens in the story seems to be that the possessed man is no longer out of his mind, but has been exorcised or healed to be now "in his right mind". That's certainly not what we'd expect to be the scariest happening in this text, is it? I mean, I think we'd understand that seeing a herd of pigs run over a cliff into the sea and drown could be frightening. But that's *not* what scared them the most. What really terrifies them is seeing the man in his right mind---the healing and restoration of this man is what fills them with fear, more than anything else that occurred. Jesus is the scariest person and the healing and restoration of a tormented soul is the scariest happening. What's up with that?

Let's think this through a bit. 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, how to avoid 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? 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? Can all these forget and forgive? The change in this man wasn't really so easy to accept, was it?

And isn't that still true today? "Better the devil you know" we sometimes say, when we consider making a change, an ironic phrase in the context of this text. "Better the devil you know" than taking a risk on hope or healing or new beginnings. We may think that not only personally, but systemically, as we acknowledged the larger metaphors at play in this story also. Is it easy to dismantle racism or sexism or any of the isms? Is it worth even trying to do right by the native inhabitants of this nation that our forebears so wronged? Is working to save the environment worthwhile or is it all too far gone for help? Wouldn't nurturing such visions call for changes of behavior and attitudes within ourselves also, change we tend to resist? Resigned complacency, even to something detrimental, can be that "devil we know" and seem far easier to accept than recognizing that God can bring about change and new life, and God would like for us to be a part of that effort. Change *isn't* always welcome or easy, not when we've become accustomed to living with the old,

bad ways. Yet if anyone stands as an agent of change, it's Jesus. In this text, he takes on the demonic in both personal and systemic ways and makes a new life for a tormented soul. That's potent change---no wonder the people are terrified of him!

But there it is—the scary truth of our God: There is no place God's compassion and power do not extend. *No place*. Christ still stands in the dark and scary places of death, at the bedsides of the ill, beside the struggling addict, beside the homeless mentally ill person. There is no place God's compassion and power do not extend—including to us, in all of our brokenness. 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. It can be a dark and scary world; this text names that truth. Sometimes we or those we love are tormented souls; this text names that truth. God scares us with God's power to combat evil and brokenness, to heal what seemed beyond hope; change frightens us. This text names that truth also. So this is not a comfortable story. But it's a powerful story about change and hope and redemption. And God is all over change and hope and redemption; for our sake and for the sake of the world. If Christ stands with us in those dark and scary places with a word of hope and healing, maybe we can do the same for others. Amen.