

A Tale from the Darkside

Mark 5:1-20

Two men were walking home after a Halloween party and decided to take a shortcut through the cemetery just for laughs. Right in the middle of the cemetery they were startled by a tap-tap-tapping noise coming from the misty shadows.

Trembling with fear, they found an old man with a hammer and chisel, chipping away at one of the headstones.

“Holy cow, Mister,” one of them said after catching his breath, “You scared us half to death - we thought you were a ghost or a zombie! Why are you working here so late at night?”

“That idiot undertaker!” the old man grumbled. “He misspelled my name!”

If you find eerie scenes exciting, direct your mind’s eye to this one. It is night on the eastern edge of Gennesaret. Ascending from the beach are limestone cliffs where tombs have been carved into the rock ... an ancient graveyard. Starlight reflecting off the water reveals the silhouette of debris washed onto the beach from a recent storm. Eyes cannot see them, but ears detect the disgusting grunts of a huge herd of pigs. Through the darkness, one hears the maniacal cry of the cemetery’s resident lunatic, a dangerous madman who inhabits these tombs.

This story of a demon-possessed madman and our story from last week of Jesus calming a storm belong together. They provide glimpses of Jesus that His disciples had not yet seen. To this point in Mark’s gospel, everything has occurred in Galilee. The Twelve have seen many healings and exorcisms, but all this had happened in a land where it was exciting to think that Jesus might be the long-awaited Jewish *Messiah*. But, one evening, as a long day of ministry drew to an end, He said to His disciples, “Let us go over to the other side.” This was Gentile territory, but not just any Gentile territory. The eastern shore of Galilee was where these gentiles buried their dead.

It was during this trip to this Gentile side of the lake that a terrible storm arose, and the inhabitants of the boat were certain that they were about to be swallowed into the deep. Jesus proved that He was more than the *Messiah* they had in mind, a Jewish political and spiritual figure. This *Messiah* silenced the storm. The disciples beheld the awesome presence of holiness. The terrible experience of the storm passed, and the boat arrived at the eastern shore. According to Matthew, this graveyard had two lunatics. Mark only features the more prominent one. Luke tells us that he ran about the tombs naked. The Twelve were, no doubt, still a bit on edge as they beheld this eerie setting, an event every bit as terrifying in its own right as the storm had been.

I. A Dreadful Condition (1-8)

¹They went across the lake to the region of the Gerasenes. ²When Jesus got out of the boat, a man with an evil spirit came from the tombs to meet him. ³This man lived in the tombs, and no one could bind him any more, not even with a chain. ⁴For he had often been chained hand and foot, but he tore the chains apart and broke the irons on his feet. No one was strong enough to subdue him. ⁵Night and day among the tombs and in the hills he would cry out and cut himself with stones.

⁶When he saw Jesus from a distance, he ran and fell on his knees in front of him. ⁷He shouted at the top of his voice, “What do you want with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? Swear to God that you won’t torture me!” ⁸For Jesus had said to him, “Come out of this man, you evil spirit!”

A. Every Eerie Detail Is as Poignant as It Is Sinister

This man terrified the locals. He was an ancient version of the incredible Hulk. People had tried to subdue him, but he destroyed the fetters they placed on his hands and feet. He screamed like a madman, as demons typically caused their victims to scream. His naked body was scarred and disfigured, for he was accustomed to literally hacking on himself with stones.

As frightening as this demoniac was, he was also a pathetic character. If anyone had ever cared about him, no one was left in his life now. The ancients believed that demons resided in desolate places, so a cemetery was a natural place to find him. After that harrowing experience with the storm, I imagine his appearance was unsettling for the Twelve as they nudged one another and whispered, "Crazy, naked guy approaching at 10 o'clock." But, as mad as this man appeared to be, the demon within was completely lucid. He knew Who Jesus was. He dropped to his knees and begged, "Don't torture me!" This demon knew that Jesus wielded power to cast him into the abyss, that abode of darkness where Jews believed demons awaited their final destruction.

B. In this Blend of Pathos and Evil, We Recognize the Nature of Sin

Humorist Brian Kiley shares: "I went to a bookstore today. I asked the woman behind the counter where the self-help section was. She said, 'If I told you, that would defeat the whole purpose.'" Our sin condition is faintly reflected in that little anecdote. We cannot help ourselves in this matter of sin, and yet, there is a way in which we must want to *TRY* to help ourselves. Sin cannot be whipped in our own strength, but there are two equally valid truths about sin that we must accept simultaneously. On the one hand, we are each responsible for our choices and the sins we commit. On the other, we are slaves to sin's inevitability. We cannot embrace an either/or view of sin. We must acknowledge both, or our practical Christianity will be flawed.

We all grow weary of the countless ways that our culture absolves people of responsibility for the things they do. We blame impulses, addictions as well as the tough breaks of early childhood. Sin is lawlessness. But, sin is also captivity. I can get so agitated over insisting that people take responsibility for themselves that I can forget how helpless they really are to free themselves from sin's shackles. If I view their sins too severely, I can lose the compassion to help them. But, if I view their sins too sentimentally, I may not hold them accountable. Somehow, Jesus always found a way to minister in the proper balance. Of course, the first needed thing was deliverance.

II. A Demonic Confrontation (7-13)

...⁷He shouted at the top of his voice, "What do you want with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? Swear to God that you won't torture me!"⁸For Jesus had said to him, "Come out of this man, you evil spirit!"

⁹Then Jesus asked him, "What is your name?"

"My name is Legion," he replied, "for we are many."¹⁰And he begged Jesus again and again not to send them out of the area.

¹¹A large herd of pigs was feeding on the nearby hillside. ¹²The demons begged Jesus, "Send us among the pigs; allow us to go into them."¹³He gave them permission, and the evil spirits came out and went into the pigs. The herd, about two thousand in number, rushed down the steep bank into the lake and were drowned.

A. A Word about Demons for Our Age of Skepticism

Were you to ask me if I have ever seen a clear case of demon possession, I would have to answer, “No.” Were you to ask me if I believe that Satan can still operate in this way and very well might, I would have to answer, “Sure!” Satan is a powerful adversary, and his legions of demons are real. I dismiss nothing about him or his demons on the basis of my own narrow experiences.

In the meantime, many level-headed missionaries are reporting things from the mission field, supernatural events that fall beyond the scope of our experiences. Peter Wagner, from Fuller Seminary School of World Mission says, “Many Southern Baptist missionaries are seeing tremendous acts of God out on the mission field, but say that they can’t talk about it here (in North America).” Their presumption is that their home churches would not believe them.

If the work of demons today is any different than in the first century, it could be because Satan manages his own battle plan. Given the power of Jesus demonstrated in the New Testament over the demons of Hell, I suspect that rampant demon activity in this culture might just trigger a significant revival back to faith in God. Modern arrogance affords Satan a different and better opportunity than simply sending his minions to possess people. Modern man thinks he can find a natural explanation for everything. This naturalism has the unfortunate effect of causing man to minimize God in his thinking. But, there is another problem that flows from this insistence that everything can be explained by natural causes. Man does not understand the darkness either. Satan is not alarmed if he is small in the world’s thinking. That works just fine for him, because if he is small in the world’s thinking, God will likely be small in the world’s thinking as well.

B. These Demons Wanted to Bargain with Jesus

According to verse 8, Jesus had already commanded the demon to leave the man. As I read the text, I don’t get the impression that this demon was any more trouble for Jesus to cast out than any other demon, just more “whiney”. He knew that he was done for. He wasn’t arrogantly resisting. Like a child trying to get ten minutes tacked onto his bedtime, he was negotiating. “At least, let me stay in the region. Don’t consign me to the abyss.” Jesus asked the demon for a name. According to the exorcists of the Pharisees, knowing a demon’s name was step one for getting rid of him. The exorcist would simply call on the name of a higher being to run him off.

Because he had no other choice in the presence of Jesus, the demon answered, “My name is Legion, for we are many.” A Roman legion was a fighting force of 6,826 men. 6,826 would be a lot of demons, but here “Legion” only means “many”. The conversation gets a bit convoluted at this point, but in a meaningful way. Mark switches back and forth from singular pronouns to plural; “he” “us” “them.” We can never be sure when this single human mouth is speaking for the man, for one chief demon or for all of the demons. This is purposeful. The reader gets the impression that the darkside has thoroughly taken over in this unfortunate man’s life.

C. “Legion” Got What He Asked for, But *NOT* What He Wanted

Jesus does not negotiate with whiney demons, nor does He take pity on them. When Legion asked to occupy the pigs, perhaps, the probable intent was to hang out in them for a while, until Jesus went on His way. Then, they would either attack the man again, or find some other poor soul. Jesus accommodated Legion’s request, but a pig has no spirit for a demon to torment. A demon cannot twist a pig’s mind. All these malevolent destroyers could do to a herd of pigs was throw them into a panic, and they ended up in the very abyss they had so wanted to avoid.

To this day, some people are troubled that Jesus would allow these poor innocent pigs to be destroyed, but what more powerful and vivid proof of this man's deliverance could He offer? These ancient eyewitnesses equated the sea with the abyss, the place where demons meet their doom. Mark uses a continuous action verb tense to emphasize that the pigs vanished one by one by one into the sea. It takes a while for two thousand pigs to drown themselves. "Isn't that cruel," someone may ask. Please! There is no doubt that people mean more to God than pigs and much more than commerce. Don't grieve over 2000 pigs that would have one day ended up on an *Egg McMuffin* anyway. You won't be flattered by how that reflects back on you as we read on.

III. A Dutiful Commission (14-20)

¹⁴Those tending the pigs ran off and reported this in the town and countryside, and the people went out to see what had happened. ¹⁵When they came to Jesus, they saw the man who had been possessed by the legion of demons, sitting there, dressed and in his right mind; and they were afraid. ¹⁶Those who had seen it told the people what had happened to the demon-possessed man—and told about the pigs as well. ¹⁷Then the people began to plead with Jesus to leave their region.

¹⁸As Jesus was getting into the boat, the man who had been demon-possessed begged to go with him. ¹⁹Jesus did not let him, but said, "Go home to your family and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and how he has had mercy on you." ²⁰So the man went away and began to tell in the Decapolis how much Jesus had done for him. And all the people were amazed.

A. Consider the Pictures of Salvation that Attend this Scene

Sin is self-destructive. Sin is madness. But Jesus is greater than our sins. A man, who had been running through the tombs, screaming and mutilating himself, is calmly sitting. Luke tells us that he is at Jesus' feet. A man no one could restrain is joyfully self-restrained. A man who had been naked is now clothed after an encounter with Jesus. I am reminded of Isaiah's metaphor that all our acts of righteousness are "filthy rags" in God's sight, but I am also reminded of Paul's image of God's redeemed now clothed with Jesus' own righteousness. A mad man feared throughout the whole countryside is now as harmless as a lamb. A former lunatic is now in his right mind.

Do you realize that there was a time when we too were self-destructive, spiritually naked and nowhere close to thinking straight? But to repair us in all these matters is why Christ came:

²¹Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior. ²²But now he has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation. – Colossians 1:21, 22

B. Rather than Rejoice over the Man, the People Cried out, "Leave Us"

Sin causes us to shun God's presence. He is holy, and every sinner intrinsically understands that he is not. What causes the world to attack God's people with charges of intolerance and bigotry? The hypocrisy and misdeeds of professed Christians throughout history may play a role, but only a marginal one. The belittling of Christians is usually rooted in the fear of true righteousness which, by its nature, demands that cherished sin must go. Holiness condemns unholiness, so, rather than face the medicine of repentance that leads to grace, many opt to turn on the truth.

In 1981, police in California staged an intense search for a car thief, even to the point of placing announcements on local radio stations to contact the thief. On the front seat of the stolen car sat a box of crackers that, unknown to the thief, were laced with poison that the owner of the car had intended as rat bait. Now the police and the owner of the VW Bug were more interested in finding the thief to save his life than to recover the car. So often when we run and hide from God, we feel it is to escape his judgment. But what we are actually doing is eluding His rescue.

C. Jesus Charged this Man to Tell Everyone He Knew about His Good Fortune

For the first time, the disciples saw that Jesus came not only to help the children of Israel, but also as a Savior for the whole world. It is understandable that this man wished to stay with Jesus, but the Lord had other plans. He must remain with his own as a witness to God's blessing. This was different from what Jesus often told others that benefited from His miracle power, which was to tell no one what had happened. On the Jewish side of the lake, there was much misguided messianic enthusiasm which got in the way of the truth about God that Jesus wanted to reveal. There was no such enthusiasm here. No one was running to Jesus for miracles. In fact, they feared and resented Him because of this miracle. But, where was a powerful testimony to God's power and grace more needed than among a people who prized a bunch of pigs more than they prized a man?

Jaroslav Pelikan tells of hearing his eight-year-old daughter sing "Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so," and reflecting on how those lyrics did not really fit her experience. "She had not read the Bible. She knew that Jesus loved her because her mother, her father, her Sunday-school teacher, her pastor, and others in the Christian community had told her so. Only later would she come into contact with the Bible."

Sometimes, a voice is more valuable than a verse. In some instances, a man noticeably and vividly changed by the power of Jesus needs to share the reason for the hope that he has.

Interesting, is it not? Jesus left a witness in a place where most of the people gave Him the boot. His power over demons was unnerving. He had cost them a small fortune in livestock. But, eventually, the reality that this formerly mad demoniac was now whole, might sink in. He was not trained like the Twelve to be a herald of the kingdom, but he was changed, and Jesus did it.

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