

Rev. Timothy M. Crummitt

Second Sunday after Pentecost - Year C

St. Paul's Lutheran Church

Isaiah 65:1-9

Psalm 22:19-28

Galatians 3:23-29

Luke 8: 26-39

06/23/2019

### **Gospel**

The holy Gospel according to St. Luke:

26Then [Jesus and his disciples] 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.

The Gospel of our Lord

### **Prayer**

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen

### **Breaker of Chains**

Good morning! Of all the stories in the Bible, the healing of the man with many demons is by far my favorite. We find the story in three of the Gospels. The versions in both the Gospels of Luke and Mark give the story a better telling than what we find in Matthew. For the longest time I wasn't able to even put into words why I felt so drawn to

this tale. In fact, much of this week was spent trying to articulate how I felt, with little success. So I would find myself all week staring off into the distance, lost in thought, trying to capture that feeling of the first time I remember REALLY hearing this story.

The text tells us a lot about who Jesus is, about what kind of world God is trying to create, and at the heart of it all, the struggle of one man. When the story was originally told, and for years after, the reality of a man who was possessed would not have been anything surprising or worth notice. Spirits and demons were a reality of the world in which people lived, beings that existed in the deserted and wild places of the world, just as real and invisible to us as something like an electron or some microscopic organism. It wasn't until relatively recently that the approach to the story shifted from one of possession and demons to signs of emotional distress and mental illness. Today's sermon won't be about which of the two approaches I find to be more accurate or true. Instead, I share the facet of this story that has hit me the most profoundly.

One commentator summarizes it well saying: *“He was considered possessed by demons, so worn out and distressed that he wore no clothes and lived among the tombs, an outcast in his own community, so feared that he was often bound by shackles and kept under guard.”*<sup>1</sup> To help us understand what this would mean for someone of a Jewish background you need to realize that *“Pigs were unclean and abhorrent. They were easily associated with Gentile uncleanness. Tombs were also a source of uncleanness and in Jewish areas they were whitewashed so that one might*

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<sup>1</sup> Bartlett, David L., and Barbara B. Taylor. *Feasting on the Word. Year C, Vol. 3* Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008. p. 166.

*not come in contact with a tomb accidentally,*"<sup>2</sup> writes another commentator. But this man, in this town, is not a Jew. Jesus has traveled across the sea of Galilee to the land of unclean Gentiles to find one man, possessed by a legion. Luke Timothy Johnson, a professor from Emory University and one of the premier scholars in the world on Luke/Acts (which I find ironic), breaks down the word legion writing the following: "*This is a Latin loan word in the Greek. The military unit called the legio consisted of between four and six thousand soldiers, so a large number of demons is present!*"<sup>3</sup> Clearly this man was experiencing hell.

As I sat in one of the four classroom in the Voigt building at Southern Seminary I was having trouble paying attention. Now, this wasn't because I didn't find the topic interesting, no, I was distracted. You see I was becoming more and more frustrated with the tables that the school had provided for students in the building. At first glance they all seemed to be the same table, and it was obvious that they were indeed made by the same manufacturer, but they had been purchased at different times and so we were left with what was essentially three different types of tables. Two were same size but different in design and build quality. The third type were longer than the other two and of a lesser quality like one type of the smaller tables. To be honest, they had seen better days. The more beaten up tables were downstairs, which I found odd since these rooms were the places that tours were usually shown, why not have the downstairs rooms look

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<sup>2</sup>Keck, Leander E. *The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary Volume VIII*. Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 2015. pp. 152-153.

<sup>3</sup> Johnson, Luke T., and Daniel J. Harrington. *The Gospel of Luke*. Collegeville, Minn: Liturgical Press, 1991. p. 137.

nicer than the upstairs classrooms? And why in the world didn't they put the matching tables in the same rooms to begin with?! And don't get me started on the chairs!

Over the next few weeks the tables became more and more distracting, so I decided to take matters into my own hands. One Saturday when nobody was using the building I went in and spent a few hours re-arranging the classrooms. I carried the very heavy, but noticeably nicer and newer tables, downstairs to main two classrooms. Then I carried the long and beaten up tables to the third classroom upstairs and then the other tables to the fourth classroom. Then I arranged them all so they were in nice lines, and finally I moved the nicer and more comfortable chairs to the main classrooms, making sure any odd-ball chairs were banished to the second floor in a room where I was least likely to spend any time. Finally I did a little organizing of the cords, cables, and other things in the room to help clean things up a bit.

Now I did all of this in secret. Because when you're diagnosed with Obsessive Compulsive Disorder you become embarrassed when you feel compelled to fix something that has been distracting you. My life is full of stories like this one. The equal part desire and shame to just FIX that one thing because it's jarring your mind over and over again. The frustration over your inability to just let things go! And that's just the physical manifestations of the disease. How about the times the obsessive patterns spiral my brain down and around convincing myself that something wasn't good enough, that I KNEW I could never do a good job at such and such a task. These are the realities of my mental illness. I don't share this because I want your pity, or because I think you can help. No, I just want you to put yourself into the shoes of someone who

has felt just a small taste of what it might have been like for that man bound in chains, living among the dead, with his struggle and his life literally naked before others.

So no, I haven't been able to put into words why this story has been so profound. But maybe that's because it hints at a reality so deep within myself that words simply don't do it justice.

Richard Schaffer writes that for our possessed man it would have been like *"his life is essentially out of his control."*<sup>4</sup> Alan Culpepper helps the story hit a little closer to home, writing: *"How many families are at their wits' end because no one has been able to help them cure or care for a mentally ill loved one? We no longer use chains and shackles but straitjackets, padded cells, injections, tranquilizers, and electric shock. But still some mentally ill persons are driven 'into the wilds'"*<sup>5</sup> Culpepper, commenting on the man's answer when asked for a name replies "legion" says that *"With such a response, the man acknowledged that he no longer had any individual identity. He had lost his name. He had lost his individuality. All that was left was a boiling struggle of conflicting forces. It was as though a Roman legion was at war within him."*<sup>6</sup> When Robin Williams died you often heard phrases like "he lost the fight." But with mental illness we were never able to see the thousands, maybe even millions of battles that Robin DID win. Every time he decided to live it was another victory. Have you ever noticed that for someone who is struggling with a mental illness they have to break and

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<sup>4</sup> Bartlett, David L., and Barbara B. Taylor. *Feasting on the Word. Year C, Vol. 3* Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008. p. 168.

<sup>5</sup> Keck, Leander E. *The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary Volume VIII*. Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 2015. p. 155

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, p. 155.

crash before everyone else can see how bad it was? It isn't until after the meltdown that we often show sympathy, never realizing that maybe the last weeks or months had been just as trying.

So here is my challenge for you, I need you to do better than the crowds that greet Jesus and the demoniac man. They are terrified and beg Jesus to leave! Fred Craddock writes *“But now the power of God for good comes to their community and it disturbs a way of life they had come to accept. Even when it is for good, power that can neither be calculated nor managed is frightening.”*<sup>7</sup> Another says that *“Rather than recognizing and celebrating the God-given good fortune of their neighbor, the people of the surrounding countryside were struck with fear. How ironic that the demons accepted the authority of God in Jesus so much quicker than the Gerasenes!”*<sup>8</sup> And *“The primary question is not, ‘who are you?’ But rather, ‘what are you going to do with me?’ Simply recognizing the presence of God is not the same as committing oneself to that presence.”*<sup>9</sup>

People argue against universal health care saying that it will cost too much. I would argue that the cost is so high that we can't afford NOT to help! Our ability to reach out and help one another is what we have been called by Christ to do. Jesus sets an extreme example for us today, traveling across the Sea of Galilee, visiting a Gentile town out of his way so that he can heal just one. single. person.

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<sup>7</sup> Craddock, Fred B. *Luke*. Louisville, Ky: John Knox Press, 1990. p. 117

<sup>8</sup>Bartlett, David L., and Barbara B. Taylor. *Feasting on the Word. Year C, Vol. 3* Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008. p. 170.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, p. 168.

Alan Culpepper argues that *“The story of the Gerasene Demoniac should now be interpreted so that it speaks a word of assurance and hope to those for whom every day is a battle of depression, fear, anxiety, or compulsive behavior. They will understand what would lead a person to say that his name is ‘mob.’*”<sup>10</sup> So I leave you with the hope that while we may fail, our God never does. Traveling untold miles, God reaches out to restore us to community, breaking our chains and loving us with a compassion that shines brighter than the sun. Amen.

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<sup>10</sup> Keck, Leander E. *The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary Volume VIII*. Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 2015. p. 155.