

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

06/19/2022

Juneteenth

### **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.

### **Outcast**

Good morning! Our Gospel lesson today is a powerful one. At least, for me, it's always been that way. Scripture, like any good story, has a way of grabbing you in a visceral way that's just hard to describe. The story of the Gerasene demoniac is, for me, one such story. I want to say it was sometime in early high school when I first took notice of our reading, but it left a mark. Now, most of you are probably aware, but in seminary I was diagnosed with Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder, Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, Anxiety, and Depression. But those diagnoses came later in my adult life, and when I first heard our Gospel lesson it spoke to a part of my soul that knew on some level EXACTLY how the Gerasene

demoniac felt. I remember reading it and being overcome with emotion. Here was a man who knew how I felt. Someone I connected with over the distance of time, space, culture, and language. Before I even knew that I was struggling with mental illness, I locked onto a story that spoke to what I was going through.

The lesson was originally written in the Gospel of Mark.<sup>1</sup> The writers of both Matthew and Luke use Mark as a basis for their own Gospels, and so we see it in Matthew too.<sup>2</sup> But Luke changes the story from the original source, making grammatical and narrative tweaks. In our three year lectionary cycle we only encounter the story here in year C after our stint of time in the Gospel of John. (The Revised Common Lectionary, made up of year A, B, and C is the three year cycle of assigned texts that we follow for our worship pattern.) But before we can even dive into what happens when Jesus steps foot on shore, we need to back up and take a look at where we've come from.

In Luke 8:22 we read that Jesus and the disciples get into a boat and cross the Sea of Galilee. A serious storm hits them, all the while Jesus takes a nap. When the boat starts to fill up with water the disciples finally wake Jesus up. Then, he gets up, and yells at the storm, and with only the power of his voice, he commands the storm to stop. The disciples are “afraid and amazed” and say “*Who then is this, that he commands even the winds and the water, and they obey him?*”<sup>3</sup>

While that story is a sermon on its own, it's important to remember that in the first creation story in Genesis God uses nothing but the power of God's voice to create the world. Speaking to the winds and the water, just as

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<sup>1</sup> Mark 5:1-20

<sup>2</sup> Matthew 8:28-34

<sup>3</sup> Luke 8:25b NRSV

Jesus does here, and shaping them. Storms were powerful things that were beyond the scope of mortals, so when Jesus stops something that terrified the average first century Jew, people take notice.

We go directly from Jesus controlling the forces of nature to our story today. Jesus literally gets out in unclean territory. R. Alan Culpepper writes that *“The story assumes the sensitivities of Jewish piety. 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 not come in contact with a tomb accidentally.”*<sup>4</sup> So... what is Jesus doing in what might be the last possible place for a good Jew to show up? He’s doing exactly what he always does, breaking down social barriers and bucking the expectations of the culture of his day.

We tend to look at demons a little differently than the understanding of someone in the First Century. We tend to immediately connect demons with Satan and the spiritual battle. But it would have been different for Jesus, the man, and the writer of Luke. Culpepper continues, *“demons roamed desolate places seeking refuge...”*<sup>5</sup> *“In the understanding of many, the world was populated by demons, spirits, nymphs, centaurs, and angels, who controlled natural processes and often took possession of persons or controlled their fate. The demon could enter a person through the ears, nose, or mouth. Amulets, magic, sacrifices, and rituals were needed if one were to have any hope of appeasing or escaping these spiritual powers.”*<sup>6</sup> But, Jesus is strong, so strong in fact that when he asks

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<sup>4</sup> Keck, Leander E. *The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary*. Volume 8. Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 2015. pp. 152-153.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. pp. 154-155.

the demon its name, it's forced to answer. A name had power in the first century, and knowing the name of a demon meant that one had the upper hand in exorcizing it.

The exchange is interesting. The demon immediately recognizes Jesus, an ironic comparison with the disciples' inability to understand who Jesus is a few verses earlier after the storm. The man falls down and literally says "What to me and to you?" It was a common phrase, which could be described as "*When one person was unjustly bothering another.*"<sup>7</sup> I can't help but laugh at the demon being annoyed that Jesus shows up. But here is where things get interesting. Jesus demands to know the demon's name. Its name is "Legion." Now, legion is a Latin word, and was the title for a Roman military unit, a unit that consisted of "*between four and six thousand soldiers.*"<sup>8</sup> So it's immediately clear that Jesus is dealing with some powerful stuff. That's A LOT of demons.

Let's recap. Jesus has set off to a place away from any Jewish control or power, to do work with a man who was a Gentile, in an unclean place near tombs, in a place that demons roam in the wilderness, with a man who an entire town has been unable to subdue, who breaks literal chains, and who is possessed with around four to six thousand demons. The entire story would lead you to think that Jesus would fail... and yet, with just the power of his voice, he commands the demons to leave the man. Our God is powerful...

And the story shows us that Jesus cares about everyone, regardless of who they are. They get right back into the boat and sail back to home base after this healing. Jesus has made an entire trip just to bring relief to this

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<sup>7</sup> <https://bible.org/netbible/> Note 98.

<sup>8</sup> Johnson, Luke T., and Daniel J. Harrington. *The Gospel of Luke*. Collegeville, Minn: Liturgical Press, 1991. p. 137.

one single person! Again, Culpepper makes a powerful observation about the man when he reveals his name. *“With such a response, the man had acknowledged that he no longer had an 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>9</sup> Wow... Can you imagine? What this man had been going through was so painful that it had taken away all agency he had. No choice was his own.

That is why it is so important that we reach out to those in our own community who are chained down, walking among the tombs, living with all individuality stripped from them. The month of June is Pride month, a time of great significance to our LGBTQIA+ siblings, they are certainly a group that knows that pain. Likewise, today is especially important for people of color who have been celebrating Juneteenth for years, all the while experiencing the reality of racism and white privilege every single day of their lives.

All of these people, and anyone else who knows the pain of being an outcast, are central to the ministry of Jesus Christ. Did you notice that after the man is healed he wants to follow Jesus? And here is the neat thing... Jesus tells him to *“declare what God has done for you.”* But what the man does instead is declare what *“Jesus had done for him.”* He sees clearly who Jesus is, God in the flesh. And he becomes a powerful ally for the work of God. Here, chapters before Jesus sends any disciple out, long before his crucifixion, death, and resurrection, long before the miracle of Pentecost, one man carries the Good News of Jesus Christ among the Gentiles. Letting

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<sup>9</sup> Keck, Leander E. *The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary*. Volume 8. Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 2015. p. 155.

them know all the good that God HAD done, IS doing, and will CONTINUE to do. Amen.