



“Conversations with a Savior: The Demoniac”

Lectionary 12 – Fifth Sunday after Pentecost
5:30 p.m., Saturday, June 18, 2016
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Camp Hill, Pennsylvania

Galatians 3:23-29; Luke 8:26-3

Grace to you and peace, from God who is, who was, and who is to come. Amen.

Our reading from Luke tonight is one of my favorite gospel stories. Although, truth be told, I like Mark's version of it better. Mark is more action orientated, and even though Luke is fairly fast paced, things really zip along in Mark. Regardless, this is a good story.

But there are things going on in our story that may well be things that the original hearers would have caught onto instantly, but we, with our 21st century, North American ears, tend to miss.

Because this story revolves around a naked guy, living in a cemetery, super strong, who acts crazy, is apparently possessed, and lives near pigs. Let's go over them, from least offensive to greatest.

“For a long time he had worn no clothes. . .”

Okay, so the guy is naked. We might give him “no thank you” glance, if we happened to see someone walking down the street naked, but males being at least half naked is something that most of us are somewhat accustomed to, and probably even more so in an agricultural area. We don't know for certain why he's not wearing clothing: maybe he ripped it off, maybe his clothes simply got so old and worn they simply fell off of his body. Regardless, this guy is running around starkers.

He's also acting crazy. The folks in the nearby town have at various times attempted to restrain him, but he's always broken free. So he's strong, or he gets super adrenaline charged, or they don't restrain him properly, we don't know. But he's able to break free of the ropes, chains and shackles – so that's kind of scary.

That possession thing? There are times in scripture when behavior a person is exhibiting can be read by modern medical people and diagnosed as mental illness. And sometimes in scripture, behavior a person is exhibiting can be read by modern medical people and turns out to really be possession by . . . something. And that appears to be the case here. And I say it that way because of the description of what happens, which we'll get to in a moment. But you don't want someone who is possessed hanging around folks, either for fear of *them* getting possessed as well, or of them getting harmed.

Now the last two things on that list that don't ring quite as loudly to us 21st Century North Americans as they might to the first century hearers, and actually, they are pretty close to being on equal footing for first century hearers. This fellow is living in a cemetery, near pigs. So a quick review of burial practices and hygiene in the Law of Moses is probably in order.

You might remember from the Good Friday readings and other stories that, in Israel in the first century, when a Jewish person dies, the body is wrapped in cloth, covered in perfume, and placed into what we would understand to be a mausoleum or a crypt – they would call it a tomb. Technically, it was a cave, or large hole, dug into a hillside. The corpse would be left there to decompose. After a year, family would come back, gather up the bones (because by that time, that would be all that was left), place the bones in a special burial box, and that box was what would be “buried.” A faithful Jewish person would not purposefully come into contact with a corpse if at all possible. Because then they would have to go through all of the cleansing rituals.

Did you catch what our lesson said about our fellow?

“he did not live in a house but in the tombs.” (v27c).

So we're not quite certain what this means. It could mean that he lived in the cemetery, sleeping in the open, amongst the tombs? Or is it more he lives inside the tombs with the decaying corpses? Either way, he's around corpses, and therefore ritually unclean. And probably he's generally unwashed, as well.

And finally, the pigs. They're, well, pigs. A faithful Jewish believer does not eat pork, and they don't go near pigs. Given the proximity to a swine herd that happens in this story, this fellow (or at least the cemetery in general) is close to where a rather large herd of swine (Mark reports it as two thousand) resides.

So these are all the red flags that are going off for those who heard this story in the first century. Even if they were Gentiles, they would be aware of some of the taboo's that several of these issues raise.

But the conversation itself . . . well, actually, there are a couple of conversations, a “before” and an “after.”

The first conversation takes place just as Jesus gets out of the boat. This man, driven by the demons, accosts Jesus, and Jesus apparently responds with commanding the unclean spirit to leave this fellow, so the spirit shouts back:

“What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I beg you, do not torment me.” (v28b)

So we learn that Jesus is able to command these spirits, and that these spirits are *afraid* of Jesus. After learning the name of the unclean demon (“Legion” – *“for many demons had entered him.”*), Jesus allows the demons to enter the pigs, who go berserk and do a head rush, straight over the side of a cliff, into the water, and they drown.

Then, the after. The townfolks get word of what happened (because the guys tending the pigs run into town to tell everyone), and they all come out of town and over to the

cemetery, where they find the formerly possessed guy, sitting quietly, clothed, and in his right mind.

And seeing this fellow clothed and sane is scarier to them than seeing him naked and possessed. They were afraid of the fellow in his madness, but they knew how to deal with someone who is insane, who is out of his mind with super-human strength: you kick them out of town and keep an eye on him. The question for them becomes: how do you deal with the person who is able to make this madman sane? Their response to Jesus, upon seeing he had calmed and clothed this man, was to beg Jesus to leave.

Isn't it interesting, though, that closing conversation that Jesus has with the former madman? Jesus acquiesces to the demands of the towns people to leave, yet it almost appears that he blows off this former madman:

³⁸ The man from whom the demons had gone begged that he might be with him; but Jesus sent him away,

Wow. So there's gratitude for you. It's almost like 'Go away, ya bother me.' Because it's almost lost on us the reason Why Jesus says what he says, we have to pay attention:

(Jesus says) ³⁹ "Return to your home, and declare how much God has done for you."

If we're not paying attention, we miss that.

Jesus wants this fellow, this man who was possessed, this fellow who scared people, just by existing; he wants this man to Go and Tell people what it is that God has done for him. How God has made him whole. Jesus wants the formerly naked madman to go around the lake area, this area where he had been terrorizing people, and show them, now, how sane he is, and declare to folks that it was the Lord God is the one who has made him whole.

Which is exactly what he does:

So he went away, proclaiming throughout the city how much Jesus had done for him.

That's an amazing story.

But there's a little bit more to it. Because as I read that story, I realize that this man is not the only one who has to battle demons. I do, and I'm pretty sure so do you.

Now, the demons that we battle may well not be the same as what this man had to battle. The demons we battle could be clicking on those internet sites that we know aren't really all that good for us. The demons that we battle might be eating too much of, or the wrong kind of, food. Maybe our demons are tobacco or too much alcohol or prescription meds. Maybe our demons are that we always find something cutting to say about others, even though maybe we don't want to, but it always finds a way of coming out of our mouths. There are all kinds of demons that we battle every day. I can't tell you the number of times I have attempted to quit drinking Mt. Dew, because I know it's not good for me, especially after my cardiac adventures of last year, but I keep returning to it.

And I realize as well that that Mt. Dew is a bit of a silly example, but I use it because I don't want to tell you what my *real* demons are, because if I were to tell you, you would look at me with disgust, yet I also know that you all struggle with similar demons as well, the ones we don't want anyone to know about.

Yet there is good news: Christ has freed us from those demons. Yes, we may stumble and fall right back into them again, but Christ is here to pick us right back up again and again and again.

More importantly, Christ wants us to go and tell others, those who still deal with their demons and who are *Not* allowing God to free them; God want us to tell those people to trust in God, to be freed of those demons. And in that freedom it is amazing and wonderful life.

Listen to what Jesus says to this man, this Demoniac, this man set free from his oppression:

Go and declare how much God has done for you.

Amen.

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