

Ordinary Time: Legion and the Pigs (Luke 8:26-39)

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The Second Sunday after Pentecost (I Kings 19:1-15; Psalm 22:19-28; Galatians 3:23-29)

WATCH/LISTEN: www.fbcjc.org/sermon/legion-and-the-pigs

Our preaching theme this summer is “Ordinary Time.” The Apostle Paul said this about ordinary time¹: “So here’s what I want you to do, God helping you: Take your everyday, ordinary life – your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life – and place it before God as an offering. Embracing what God does for you is the best thing you can do for (God).”

So today, we continue tagging along with Jesus in all that ordinariness to see what might happen next. Our text tells us: *He continued according to plan, traveled to town after town, village after village, preaching God’s kingdom, spreading the Message ... They sailed on to the country of the Gerasenes, directly opposite Galilee. As he stepped out onto land a madman from town met him: he was a victim of demons (Luke 8:1, 16, The Message).*

When Jesus stepped onto dry ground, he was on the wrong side of the lake. He was on the eastern shore of the Galilee in the region known as the Decapolis, a Roman word to describe “the ten cities”. They were 10 Roman communities segregated from, but in distant view of the Jewish communities on the western shore. Traveling from village to village among the Jewish communities, an observant Jew could pick up a good kosher meal for lunch and maintain a ritually observant Jewish life. But if you lived among the pagans on the east side, you would violate almost all that separated the Jews from those unclean, unholy Gentiles. One commentator described it this way: “nothing ... (was) kosher; everything (was) unclean: the spirits, the pigs, the territory.” Jesus risked contamination for the life of this one man. So, what was this good Jewish boy doing on the eastern shores among the pagans, you might ask?

Jesus got out of the boat and was immediately face-to-face with the demoniac. The man had no name, no home, no community, and lived in the graveyard, the city of the dead. Jesus didn’t go to the middle of town, or into the settled communities of the Decapolis. He landed in the liminal space, the in-between place, between town and country, between farmland and desert, between land and sea, and even between life and death.

And Jesus asked this nameless man his name, what some would say was an attempt to help the man locate his identity, something often lost by those who suffer from mental illness.

“*Legion*,” the man said. Luke is telling us something about the social conditions that put the man out of his mind and out of the community. “*Legion*” was a Roman term of the massive number of Roman soldiers who maintained Pax Romana, the peace of Rome. A legion of Roman soldiers would be anywhere from 2-4,000 men who kept the peace by oppression and turned the native population to servants of a corrupt and terrifying presence.

We see people like this every day it seems. All of us recognize the demoniac on our own streets who are not a part of the community but who live in plain site along its fringes in the hidden places. Walking

¹ Romans 12:1-2, *The Message*, Eugene Peterson’s translation of Paul’s letter to the church in Rome, Colorado Springs, CO: Navpress, 1995

aimlessly, of indeterminate age but prematurely elderly with blotchy, leathery skin, some have a place to sleep but choose to live outdoors from dawn until dusk. Many don't have a place to stay and end up in the public spaces where they keep their few things in shopping carts and where they look like they're waiting for something to happen, but waiting for what?

Today, the demoniac would likely be considered someone who suffered from some disturbing form of some undiagnosed mental illness. The signs of mental illness are clear: isolation from society, homelessness, a distorted view of reality, and no sign of his family or any sign of a community who have let him go. When this man met Jesus, he was howling and injuring himself. In his day, they considered he was demon possessed, in a way in which antiquity thought of mental illness. In our own day when this happens, we would hope to treat him with psychiatry and psychotropic medications to stabilize him so he might find "his right mind" and return to living a normal life. We would hope someone in a caring ministry might connect this person to what he or she needs.

In my clinical work I saw the full range of mental and emotional ailments. I saw a patient fractured by his psychosis. I spent an hour with this disturbed man. We talked extensively, but there wasn't much therapy to be done by him or me as he clearly needed a psychiatrist who would either hospitalize him or oversee his treatment with mood-altering drugs. I didn't consider him possessed by demons, but that would likely have been the 1st c. diagnosis with no real hope of treatment or cure. I did what I could do by referring him to a psychiatrist. He could have easily ended up like this sad man left to wander among the tombs.

That said, the line between sanity and crazy can be hard to locate. Hermits, those driven to spending their lives exploring the life of the spirit, are drawn to the empty places of the desert, or perhaps to the high places where the air is thin. But those with mental illness are often found under the bridges or shuffling aimlessly through downtown streets, drawn to the dark and shadowy places, dislocated from their families, meaningful work, adequate healthcare, and home.

When we lived in San Antonio, a woman began attending our church. At first, I had little opportunity to talk with her as she would arrive late and leave early. But after a few weeks, I finally had a chance to talk with her and learned she lived in a group home 5 or 6 blocks away and she shuffled down the street to join us in worship. She suffered from schizophrenia, an illness that flattened most of her personality, and in worship, she rocked back and forth like a metronome to act out her psychic energy. If you sat behind her, it was distracting, so she sat in the back, but overall, she was quiet, non-emotive, and listening.

Occasionally at the back door at the conclusion of worship as she was leaving to return home, she would offer her hand and whisper to me, "Pray for me. The voices are speaking to me." Bravely, she kept coming and our members eventually calmed down and offered her friendship.

One Sunday, knowing how bright she was, in making our plan for worship, we took a risk and asked her to read our morning Scripture. The next Sunday, she meekly walked to the lectern with her head down and read with a powerful, sure voice. It was startling to hear this woman read the Bible.

In the end upon his healing, the man struggled to re-enter the community. He begged Jesus to go with him. Jesus gave him a simple prescription: *"Go back and tell them what great things God has done in your life."* The demoniac was like an alcoholic who gets dry, depriving everyone else the family of their scapegoat. Suddenly everyone is in an uproar because the family drunk is unwilling to carry all the negative emotional energy.

Give it up for the demoniac because his courage in staying is nothing less than breathtaking. Ours is not a retreat from the world, taking us out of the brokenness of the world. It is rather the marvelous gift of freedom from possession by the evil powers of the world, precisely so we can offer a voice of peace and hope to that world.

In our baptism, we renounce Satan and all the spiritual forces of wickedness that rebel against God, as well as the evil powers of this world which corrupt and destroy the creatures of God. Together (for we cannot do it alone) we must refuse, with all our might, to collaborate with structures of evil, so that the insane will not be the only ones to speak out; and what is more, so that there will no need for insane people. In renouncing evil, we must renounce our need for scapegoats as well, until all God's children know the dignity and joy, for which they were created.

Jesus' prescription to the man in the cemetery: "*Return to your home, and declare how much God has done for you.*" Amen.

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