

June 20, 2010
Luke 8:26-39
Scariest Than Demons
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Before I began work on this sermon this week, I very clearly remember the last time I spent time with this passage. I was in an education class at the seminary, and all the students were working in pairs. Our assignment was to look at this very scary story and figure out its theme. We needed to come up with a single sentence that: summed up the passage, was easy to remember, and would be the basis of a lesson that we could teach children.

I tend to be a pretty by-the-book person, and I was working with my wonderfully creative and tell-it-like-it-is friend. Who isn't, by the way, ever satisfied with pat answers. So, as we were working together, I began rattling off the by-the-book answers:

“How about, *Jesus heals?*” I asked.

He made a face.

Jesus shows compassion.

He shook his head.

Jesus has authority.

He shrugged.

Jesus reaches out

No....

Jesus casts out demons.

Eh...

None of those themes did it for my friend, so finally I asked, him, “Well, what would you say?”

He said, “Erin, Jesus is scary.”

Jesus is scary.

And you know, that's what the folks who were with Jesus thought, too. Here in this section of Luke, all sorts of people thought that Jesus was scary.

The disciples were afraid of Jesus. We read here that Jesus and the disciples arrived in the region of the Gerasenes by boat. And do you know what happened in that boat on their way to the Gerasenes? A huge storm came down on the lake and just about swamped their boat. Jesus had been sleeping through it. But the disciples woke up him up terrified, because it looked like they were going to drown. So Jesus got up, and in a sharp voice, he commanded the chaos of the wind and the waves to be still. As the wind died and the water grew calm, the disciples were filled with a different kind of fear. It was this eerie sense that they were in the presence of unusual power. And they said to one another, “Who is this?”

Now here, in the region of the Gerasenes (which, by the way, is Gentile territory), they've reached the destination of their nerve-racking boat ride. But their anxiety isn't about to get any better. They dock, and it's a wasteland. It's isolated and barren...and all they see are tombs. Then, a man who is naked and clearly out of his mind (or worse, demon-possessed), comes charging at them, and he's shouting at the top of his lungs. (Tell me that's not creepy.) Who is this Jesus who brought them to this

place?

Now, it turns out that this man *is* demon-possessed. And not just by one demon, or a few, but many. (The demon is called Legion. And we don't know how many demons were in the man, but in the Roman army, a legion consisted of about 5,600 soldiers.) And he's dangerous. The demons are destructive. He must have been a threat to society; people have tried to chain him like an animal. And the chains were never strong enough to hold him. And the demons are also *self*-destructive. They've driven the man from his home in the city to the tombs, in no-man's-land. In Mark's account, he says the man would cut himself with stones. The demons are so strong that as soon as they inhabit a herd of pigs, they run off and drown themselves. The man is rendered almost inhuman. This is powerful stuff. This is stuff you do not want to mess with.

And here comes Jesus, confronting this legion of Satan. Meeting great powers of evil, and darkness, and destruction head-on. Looking the demonic in the face.

And you know what? The demons are also afraid of Jesus. They know who he is. They know what he has authority to do.

He speaks, and they respond.

He demands their name, and they give it.

He casts them out, and they go.

Jesus saves the man who has been oppressed for years. He's no longer imprisoned, but free. Jesus gives him back his mind. Jesus restores his body.

And the people from the region of the Gerasenes see it.

He used to be naked, but they find him clothed.

He used to be out of his mind, but they find him in his right mind.

He used to be uncontrollable, but they find him sitting at Jesus' feet.

He used to live among the tombs, but now he's fit to go back home.

You would *think* that these Gerasene folks would be happy, or at least relieved. The demons are gone. There's no longer a vicious demoniac in the graveyard. They can have their neighbor back.

But they're terrified. They're terrified of Jesus.

Apparently, Jesus is scarier than a legion of demons.

And on the one hand, you can see where people are coming from. Raising pigs is a way of life here in this town. People need pigs to have jobs. People need jobs to have money, and they need money to live. And this Jesus clearly thinks the pigs are dispensable. Who does he think he is, coming from across the sea and throwing their livelihood away? And if he throws out the pigs today, what will he do tomorrow?¹ (They don't understand that evil doesn't leave this world except through sacrifice. Or that the life of one human being is worth more than many pigs.) So they drove him out.

They were so used to evil that it was scarier to be in the presence of Jesus, who could change everything. So they drove him out.

¹ This question was asked by Scott Hoezee.

They were afraid of Jesus.

One of my professors once said, “It is fully possible to be afraid of the Gospel.” It's fully possible to be afraid of Jesus.

Some of us are afraid of Jesus because we know who he is.

We understand that there is no place
or person
or situation
or area of our lives
that he plans to leave untouched.

And you know what? Maybe we prefer for Jesus to leave some things alone. Maybe there are areas in which we are more comfortable with the demons:

A self-destructive habit.
A broken relationship.
Self-importance.
Self-pity.
Self-hatred.

If Jesus sticks around long enough, we know he'll change things. We know he'll change *us*.
And we're afraid. So, in the places we don't want him, we drive Jesus out.

And some of us – maybe even some of us here – are afraid of Jesus because we *don't* know who he is.

We've heard rumors of his power – maybe even seen it ourselves – but we don't know if we can trust him. Some of us here (or else, people we love) have heard lies about him: that he doesn't care about us, or – worse – that he's out to get us. That he sends our pigs into the river to drown just because he can. That if we let him get too close, we'll lose ourselves.

And if that's who we're dealing with...who wouldn't be afraid? So we drive Jesus out.

But you know the scariest thing about Jesus? He doesn't go away.

You drive him out and you think he's gone, but he keeps coming back.
Jesus doesn't leave.

Or, to state it positively, Jesus does not give up on you.

He didn't give up on the people in the Gerasenes.

They drove Jesus out, but he sent the Gospel back.

I learned something pretty significant this week as I was studying this passage. I had never understood before why Jesus doesn't let the man he healed follow him back to Galilee. A ton of people from the city see what Jesus did for the man. They witness a complete transformation. But none of them want Jesus anywhere near them. They're all afraid, so they want him gone, back on the other side of the lake, where he came from.

This one man actually wanted to be with Jesus. He wanted to follow Jesus so badly that he *begged* to get into the boat with Jesus. This man was willing to be a disciple who followed Jesus everywhere

(and given the way he sat at Jesus' feet, he probably would've been a good one).

But Jesus says, "You are *not* coming with me," and he sends him home.

And I always wondered about that. I chalked it up to the mystery of God's ways. And it always troubled me.

But this is what I learned:

Jesus doesn't send the man back because he already has his quota of disciples.
He doesn't send him back because the man is a Gentile and doesn't belong in Jewish territory.

Jesus sends him back because he has a story to tell.

His story is, he's learned who Jesus is, and he's God.
And God has done so much for him.
Far from doing harm, Jesus came to give him back his life.
And even if Jesus is scary, *he is good*. He's good.

So, even though Jesus is going to get into the boat and sail back to the other side of the lake, he's not done with the region of the Gerasenes. He's leaving, but the Gospel's coming back. He's sending back someone who was nearly dead...but is alive again. Jesus' first missionary to the Gentiles is a person who was once possessed by demons, and has now been set free. And you better believe he's going to talk about it. As he goes home to his family, and his neighbors, and his old buddies – the people who love him and have missed him – you better believe they're going to listen. Which means that, really, Jesus isn't going to go away.

He's not done with the region of the Gerasenes.

He may use surprising means, but Jesus isn't going to leave.

And people of God, Jesus isn't going to leave us, either.

Some of us may be afraid of Jesus getting too close. Who knows what kinds of demons he may cast out...or what kind of life he'll bring in? Who knows what will become of you if he sticks around and changes you?

Friends, if that's you this morning – if you find yourself filled with fear - hear this word:

The God who seeks you out is trustworthy and good.

The One who doesn't leave is gentle and humble in heart.

The One who has authority to cast out a legion of demons has power to make you whole.

And if that's you this morning, find someone to pray with, even before you leave this building.

For those of us who know Jesus as Savior and Lord, we have a story to tell. *You* have a story to tell.
From what has he delivered you?

Addiction?

Hopelessness?

Chronic anger?

Bitterness?

Fear?

What new life has be brought in?

Has he given you peace with God?

Has he made you forgiving?

Has he brought you joy?

Has he given you strength you never thought you'd have?

Has he helped you act justly and love others?

Has he taught you how to love yourself?

For those who know all too well what it's like to walk through the valley of the shadow of death (and that's many of you this morning):

Has he walked with you in your sorrow?

Has his presence been a comfort?

Has the Spirit testified in your heart about the sure hope of the resurrection?

Friends, if you know the truth of this, then God has done so much for you. And that means that *you* have a story to tell. And your wonderful assignment is to go out and tell it.

[I had dinner with a pastor-friend a couple weeks ago, and he said, "God doesn't heal us just so we can enjoy being healed. God heals us so that in Christ, we, too, can be healers in this world."]

And the Spirit will use that to draw your friends, and family members, and coworkers, and neighbors to Jesus.

So, go and tell how much God has done for you.

And do not be afraid.

Amen.