

June 22, 2025 Luke 8:26-30

Our Gospel lesson for this morning is a strange story, to say the least.

First, we should note that in crossing the Sea of Galilee, Jesus has entered into Gentile territory. In fact, as one of the commentaries that I read pointed out, Jesus has crossed a theological barrier in his ministry, by entering the land of the (Jehr-uh-seens) Gerasenes. And as he steps off the boat, Jesus enters a scene that would defile any good person of the Jewish faith. He is now in unclean territory.

Just think about the details. Jesus is met by a man whom we are told has many demons. More than this, this man was nude. He had not worn clothes for many years. And if this was not enough to make any good Jew run in the opposite direction, Luke tells us that this man did not live in a house, but made his home among the dead, living in the tombs. Even if you and I, who don't share a code of ritual purity that governed the lives of the Jews of that day, encountered such a man, we would most likely erect walls of avoidance.

Clearly, this man was a tormented soul, not in his right mind. And yet, if we were to take this story in the context of the verses that immediately precede this morning's lesson, we find that this poor, tormented man, answers the question posed by Jesus' hand picked disciples. Luke tells us that as Jesus and his disciples were crossing the Sea of Galilee, Jesus fell asleep in the back of the boat. A great storm arose, and the disciples, fearing for their lives, woke Jesus, who rebuked the winds and calmed the sea.

Then in fear, the disciples asked one another, "Who is this, that he commands even the wind and water, and they obey him?" The disciples did not yet know who Jesus was because this event was just over a year into Jesus three year ministry. But when they came ashore, this nude man, who was not in his right mind, fell down at Jesus' feet and shouted at the top of his voice, "What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God?" If the man himself didn't know who Jesus was, clearly the demons that possessed him knew. Jesus then chooses to heal the man and restore him to a proper place in his community, by commanding that the demons come out of the man. To underscore the amount of demons that possessed this man, Jesus asks his name, to which the man answered "Legion." A Roman legion has 5,600 troops.

Well, the demons resist Jesus' initial command, pleading that they not be sent back to the abyss, which according to Revelation, is a prison reserved for demonic spirits. But as Jesus insisted on healing the man, the demons begged Jesus to let them enter a herd of pigs grazing on the hillside. And if you have not yet gotten the point that this was Gentile territory, here's the clincher. I can't imagine Jews raising pork.

Jesus grants their request, and casts the demons out of the man and into the pigs, which really seals their fate. The pigs then run down the hillside and into the sea, drowning themselves and

the demons. This, of course, upset those who were herding the swine, who ran off to town to tell everyone what Jesus had done. This, created quite a stir. So the people of the town came out to see for themselves what had happened.

When they got to the shore, they were stunned because this same man was now sitting at Jesus' feet, fully clothed and in his right mind. Here is another point that should not go unnoticed. This man who had never been in his right mind, assumed the position of a disciple, a student, sitting at Jesus' feet as he taught.

The rest of the story presents two distinct reactions to Jesus' triumph over the legion of demons. First is the reaction of the herders of the pigs and the people of the town. They were afraid! They had never seen or heard of anything like this, and instead of being in awe of the miraculous healing power of Jesus, instead of inviting him to stay and work his redeeming grace among those in their community, they ask him to leave. Here these Gentiles were not ready to receive Jesus yet and He honors their request and prepares to depart.

The other reaction is that of the healed man. His plight in life has been completely reversed by Jesus. He had been naked, now he is properly clothed. He had initially fallen down at Jesus' feet, shouting at him to leave him alone, now he sits at Jesus' feet, soaking in all that Jesus has to say and teach. He had been seized by demons and out of control, now he is in his right mind.

Although the rest of the (Jehr-uh-seens) Gerasenes bid Jesus to leave, this redeemed man begs Jesus to allow him to go with him. But while Jesus had granted the request of the demons to be allowed to enter the pigs, and while Jesus was about to honor the request to leave the land of the (Jehr-uh-seens) Gerasenes, Jesus refuses the request of the man whom he had restored to health. The one man who was not afraid of Jesus, who sat at his feet, hanging onto every word that he spoke, wanting to learn more from this "Son of the Most High God, was denied his request.

Instead, Jesus commissions this man as an apostle. Not only did Jesus restore this tormented man to the fellowship of his community, Jesus gave him the task of proclaiming the Gospel to those who were afraid to have Jesus remain in their midst. And Luke tells us that the man, who was now in his right mind, did just that. He went among the people and proclaimed the redeeming grace of God in Jesus the Christ.

William H. Willimon, in his commentary on our text, relates the following story. "Last year, we visited on the other side of the Sea of Galilee from Israel. In fact, we were near the site where the (Jehr-uh-seens) Gerasenes once lived. While we were there, we visited a little church in Jordan. We were told that it was a very old church. People had worshiped Christ there for many centuries.

(He goes on) I couldn't help wondering to myself, 'Is this the church? Could it be that this church might not trace its roots back to the witnessing and ministry of that man of the (Jehr-uh-seens) Gerasenes, whom Jesus commissioned to proclaim the Gospel of his saving grace? I believe it may well have been.'" End quote.

To be sure, this is a very strange story. All these details about legions of demons, pigs drowning themselves in the sea, a naked man who chose to live among the dead in tombs. It is not the kind of message that most of us would choose to use to relate to others the good news of God's saving grace in Jesus the Christ. Quite frankly, I think that Luke may well have used a little poetic license in his depiction of our Lord's first encounter with the Gentile region across the Sea from Galilee.

But the story does present us with two important points. First, it is a clear indication that the redeeming grace of God in Jesus the Christ is not confined only to the children of Israel. It is extended to all the people of the world, who will acknowledge Jesus as the Son the Most High God.

Secondly, I believe this story calls upon us to be diligent in our call to be a disciple and witness to God's saving grace in Christ. Although many may reject the message of the Gospel, we, who have been touched by the redeeming grace of God through our baptism into Christ's death and resurrection, have been commissioned by God to proclaim his saving grace. No, we may not have suffered from demon possession, but each of us in one way or another, have been touched by the healing grace of God.

Thus, let us call upon God's Spirit to empower us for discipleship, and to give us the courage to witness to God's grace in our lives.

Amen.