

*Texts: Mark 5:1-20*

*Subject: Jesus and the Man Possessed*

*Theme: What the Lord Has Done*

*3 Epiphany; Jan. 26, 2020, Annual Meeting of the Congregation, Reformation Lutheran Church, Las Vegas, NV*

Grace and peace to you from God our father in heaven and the Lord Jesus,  
Amen.

Last week we heard Jesus' parable of the sower and how some who heard it puzzled over its meaning and tried to figure it out. This week, we hear of supernatural forces and demonic possession, and of Jesus power over the unclean spirits. What do we do with this story?

I'm not a fan of horror movies. Buffy the Vampire Slayer was a favorite. Being afraid is not a feeling I seek out. Life can be scary enough. I've been alone in a city where I didn't know anyone. I've been far away from family, angry, depressed, and afraid. After the unexpected end of a relationship, I was living in L.A., where the only people I knew were a few co-workers. I found myself feeling like a failure, suffering not only a broken heart, but a loss of identity, and wondering what I could have done differently. I was walking in a fog, unable to focus, to find joy in my life, and to move forward. It was through prayer and conversation with friends and family that I was able to find forgiveness, purpose, and move forward. They were there for me. If not for that community of people - and one special dog - that came to my side at just the right time, I don't know where I would be. It was the beginning of a new journey for me, from fear to faith.

I had been away from church for a long time. I hadn't been involved in a church for 20 years. But the seed of faith was planted long before that. I knew that I was loved by God. I had learned that my failures could not separate me from God's grace and

love, and in that time of need, I cried out to God. I cried out in my car, in my apartment, on my bed, and in my heart. I was overwhelmed and afraid.

Jesus was there.

We know that some who are in pain, addicted, or otherwise struggling, are often discarded by their communities. Our neighbors who have been forced to sleep outdoors can quickly deteriorate into mental illness. Human beings might be haunted by the pain of the past, overrun with bouts of anxiety, depression, or hatred. Our minds can be thrown into turmoil by chemical imbalance or traumatic injury.

But demons?

Maybe we find this easier to explain with rational understanding, and it's not unfair to interpret this event as another kind of a healing story, this time with Jesus delivering the man from mental illness. If you or someone you know has lived with mental illness in some way, you know the burden it can be. Like any other illness, it can happen to anyone - it is not brought on by the one experiencing the symptoms. Here in the story the man is not to blame for his suffering.

There in the towns east of the Sea of Galilee, Jesus goes out among the nations - they're not in Israel anymore. The Gadarenes, or Garasenes, were people descended from Canaanites. They were under Roman rule, and not Jewish. Why did Jesus go across the sea? Was he seeking out this man? Had he heard a prayer? We don't know - but Jesus goes and gives him what is needed most. While pigs were considered unclean among faithful Jews, there was no prohibition for other people to raise and to eat them. To be among the tombs, or around dead bodies would also cause someone to be considered ritually unclean, and the man who was living out there would certainly be

considered off limits by the Jewish people. It doesn't stop Jesus from going there, along with the disciples.

It sounds like something out of a horror movie. He had been excommunicated - cast out. He couldn't be controlled, and was a threat to others and himself. No sooner than reaching the shore, this man approaches Jesus. We hear that he's busted loose from the shackles the people tried to place on him. He's extraordinarily strong, and is hurting himself. Jesus calls out the unclean spirits. They respond and know Jesus, calling him by the title "Son of the Most High God." Jesus says, "What is your name?" and the response comes, "My name is Legion; for we are many." Yikes.

I might have nightmares about that.

There seem to be not just one demon, but many - and *Legion* is indeed the name of a unit of Roman soldiers numbering 6,000. This is important. Jesus casts the multitude of spirits into the nearby swine and they run into the sea.

What monster was it that possessed the man? We can imagine the place he lived being overrun with Romans - some who worked with the occupiers made out just fine. They were tax collectors, prostitutes, and others who profited. There were those who were complicit in the subjugation of people under the power of the Empire. Others didn't fare so well. Bible scholar N.T. Wright says, "Rome was the monster of all monsters. Rome was unclean. Rome was a nation of pigs. The best place for Rome was back in the sea." The image of the swine running over the cliff into the waters also serves to remind us of the armies of Pharaoh overwhelmed by the waters of the sea during the exodus from Egypt. Mark proclaims good news - Jesus has *real power* not

only over the powers of evil in the world, but over the earthly powers that would inflict fear and suffering on people.

What possesses our bodies and minds? What fears and anxieties force us from life-giving relationships? What pain causes us to turn from the abundant life and hope and healing we have in Jesus? What divisions tear us apart from one another? Jesus is the source of life and grace that heals us. Jesus is the one who brings new life for those who have nowhere else to turn, who calls each one of us into relationship with our neighbors who need us, who gives us strength to move forward boldly proclaiming the way of peace and love. This is what the Lord has done for us.

There, among the tombs, with the pigs and demons nearby, in the midst of the empire, Jesus doesn't become unclean. Just like the healing of the leper, Jesus is the very presence of God in the places most would fear to go. Jesus makes *him* clean. Jesus brings healing. Jesus reunites the man with the community, and gives him a story to share. "Go and tell what the Lord has done" - and you can be certain he did. What has the Lord done for him? Jesus has driven out the spirits that tormented the man. He is healed and brought back into the community. He's able to sit and be calm. He can heal from his wounds. Jesus has enabled him to live among the people again, to share good news, to live out his calling, to be free.

Case closed - right?

The people of the town see the man healed and they are afraid. We don't hear that they praised God, they didn't seem to find faith at all, but they were afraid. They want Jesus to leave. Is it that they'd rather hold onto the status quo, to keep things as they are? Are they mad that Jesus just disposed of a legion of pigs - which must have

been an important part of their economy? They're not converted. They're not on Jesus' side. They're not healed. They want Him to go.

The healed man tries to hold onto Jesus, to follow Him and the disciples into the boat. But Jesus won't let him. He *sends him* back into the world. Those who are afraid need to hear the story too. To know there is one who cannot be made unclean by the evil in the world, but masters it.

That's for you to hear too. Faith is greater than fear.

We will face struggles this year. We will grieve. We will be called to share a story of healing and peace, hope, and trust in a time when our nation will be focused on an election, embroiled in a trade war, an immigration crisis, multiple military interventions, and economic ups and downs. We will be a place of safety and refuge for neighbors in need of shelter, food, and healing.

Yes, Life can be scary. Too many people are possessed by pain and addiction, are estranged, afflicted, and thrown away by their communities. Jesus stands with those who are cast out. We can become divided as a nation and a community. Faith brings us together to make a difference. We can become divided in ourselves when we become obsessed with our desires, by trying to please others, by wanting to own everything, to be right all the time, or to be perfect. At the cross, Jesus takes all that from us, for us. Our fears can overwhelm us and cause us to hurt our own bodies and minds. We have a savior who is not afraid to step into those places and bring new life. Jesus comes to those who are sick, in need, grieving, alone, and abandoned. Everywhere the world draws a line to keep people out, Jesus is there standing on the other side.

Rather than a spirit of fear, we know that we have been given a spirit of faith, to trust in the one who can drive out demons, who can heal us, who can do what we cannot do for ourselves. Go and tell what the Lord has done. Jesus drives out fear, and leads us to faith, brings us together, and makes us new.

Amen.