

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

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The story of *the Gerasene demoniac* is one we all remember, perhaps most importantly because of the story of the herd of swine heading over the cliff to perish in the sea. It's hard to get that image out of your head. In this passage, geography is important. Jesus has headed to the country of the *Gerasenes* opposite Galilee. But the key here is that this is on the eastern side of the Sea of Galilee which is actually a fresh-water lake, and it is Gentile territory. Not only that, but even today, it is an area marked by steep cliffs like those described in the passage. Luke chose this particular location because it had been the site of a Jewish revolt brutally put down by the Roman army in 67 C.E. Vespasian's general had slaughtered 1,000 rebels who were besieged at *Gerasa* after which name the area was known. They then proceeded to destroy it along with its surrounding villages.

There are usually several levels of meaning in these stories about the ministry of Jesus. In this case, although there are other dimensions (some of them quite interesting), the primary focus appears to be that Jesus is reaching out to the Gentiles, taking his message to the larger world, crossing boundaries to unite people of different backgrounds. In crossing the lake, Jesus represents the Gentile mission of Jesus and the early church. If we bear that in mind, the rest tends to fall into place nicely.

Luke makes it clear that this is Gentile territory by using language that was always associated with non-Jews who were considered unclean. Whenever we are dealing with demons, or *tombs*, or *unclean spirits*, or *storms at sea* or even *swine*, we can be pretty certain that these are all ways of defining the Gentile world.

It is clear from the passage that the demoniac himself is center-stage here. And he suffers from *what we would call* a mental disorder. He is depressed, filled with fear, anxiety and compulsive behavior. We no longer use words like demon or demoniac to refer to this kind of person because we know more about the kinds of mental disorders many people suffer through no fault of their own. His life, his behavior, his isolation lead him to diminish his own worth. He says that his name is "mob" which acknowledges that he no longer has an individual identity. He has lost his birth name. He has lost anything which could have identified him as part of the community, because that community doesn't want to deal with --- and has no tolerance for --- this kind of disorder other than to seek an exorcism. It is actually a very moving story insofar as it describes a

healing, the restoration to health of a person formerly outcast. That essential core needs no further development.

However, there is still more to be said about this particular narrative.

For example, although we no longer use terms like “demon” or “demoniac,” we do recognize evil when we see it. We have all had some kind of direct experience of the power of evil in human affairs. It’s just that today we would be much more likely to point to Timothy McVeigh’s bombing of the federal building in Oklahoma City, or the massacres at Columbine, or Virginia Tech or any of a whole list of dreadful school and crowd shootings that bring us abruptly up against the reality of evil. And I don’t think we’d quibble about using that term to refer to the people who organized and implemented these acts of violence against the larger community. And if we think about “demons” in a similar context, it can make this story come to life for us.

Let me refresh your memories about what Jesus encountered that day. “A nameless man has been exiled to the margins of human existence. He’s filthy naked in public. He can’t control his speech He’s so violent that people can’t come near him. All attempts to restrain him have failed. He exhibits the most common form of self-harm even today – self-mutilation.”

They called it demon possession. We’d find a more modern way of expressing the same general idea. “My name is ‘legion!’” the homeless man screamed. “Tortured in body, mind, and spirit, he embodied the (full) gamut of human suffering” because a Roman legion consisted of 5,000-6,000 soldiers, a large enough number to suggest a lot of *anything*. It is also easy to extend the point about that word to imagine another level of meaning in the story: namely, that the herd of swine heading over the precipice to their deaths was every Judean’s dream of what the Roman Empire deserved for its cruelty, its deprivation of freedom, its pride and its use of overwhelming force to cow people into silence. The association of a Roman legion with a herd of pigs was a priceless piece of irony. Thus, the story can be read as having an overt political intent. Everyone would have known exactly what the word “legion” referred to and would have recognized in the fate of the swine, a proper fate for their own oppressors and overseers. Had you been able to get an honest answer out of the man in the street, you would have learned that what he wanted to do with the hated Roman troops was to drive them back into the sea.

One of the more puzzling parts of this reading, however, occurs *after* the demoniac is healed by Jesus: “then all the people of the surrounding country of the Gerasenes asked Jesus to leave them;

for they were *seized with great fear*.” On the surface, this seems improbable. After all, what Jesus has done is to restore one of their own to health, and in the first century exorcisms were not uncommon. There had been some collateral damage --- the loss of the pigs, for example, but such losses were not unknown at the time. The thing that was not known or perhaps just made known, was *the name in which the healing had occurred* and the swine herd had plunged over the cliff, etc.

But this gives Luke the opportunity to tell us that the man who was healed was instructed by Jesus to go home and declare what God had done for him. Luke’s wording is: “so he went away, proclaiming throughout the city how much Jesus had done for him.” In other words, Luke is making a direct identification between Jesus and God.

This was what was shocking. This was what was producing a kind of fear which initially, at least, looks irrational. But at the time, the notion that a human being could claim to be God was considered heretical, blasphemous, outrageous. But the reading makes it clear that this is exactly what Luke is describing.

If we define “demons” as those forces which have captured us and prevented us from becoming what God intends us to be, then we are surrounded by and even possessed by demons of many kinds: “mental illnesses, schizophrenia, paranoia, addictions, obsessions, destructive habits, and so on.” So, “in *any* time, in *any* place, there are demons to fear --- things and people and ideas that we prefer to keep in shackles and under guard. But they have an annoying tendency of breaking loose. And when they do, the question is not solely the immediate consequences...or even the economic ones...but more pressing, by what power has this been done?

In the end, who is really in control? In this passage, the point seems to be that “*the Son of the Most High God* whose power transcends all of us” is the force behind the healing and its related consequences. And the people find this prospect very frightening indeed. So, the best explanation seems to be that “they collectively decided that (Jesus) was the source of their overwhelming fear,’ and he needed to leave.

In the church, the sin of sloth is regarded as one of the Seven Deadly Sins, but that word embraces much more than simple laziness. The real meaning of sloth is “spiritual boredom,” So, in that sense, it is a desire not to change. Perhaps that is part of what seized these people upon witnessing the miracle of the healing of the demoniac and its consequences for the local herd of pigs. Certainly, the demoniac had been hard to abide, but somehow the process of ridding them of him was more difficult to deal with than the original problem. So, perhaps another point Luke is

making here is that when God shows up, he is not always welcome in our midst. He shakes us up. He alters our sense of what is right and normal and familiar.

Perhaps the most important theme in this part of Luke's gospel is that this narrative is a kind of journey toward understanding who Jesus is, and that is the same journey upon which we are all joined together. It is the most basic question raised by all of the gospel accounts: "*Who is this Jesus of Nazareth?*" The disciples seem to be having the hardest time of anyone in figuring out whom they are following. They remain puzzled throughout the better part of the story and do not reach any final conclusion until they greet him in a post-resurrection appearance. In today's story, we are dealing with things that are unclean: demons, tombs, pigs, storms, Gentiles. And Jesus removes the unclean spirit in the troubled demoniac but it doesn't seem to answer the question about his identity for anyone other than the reader or hearer of Luke's tale, being told at some remove from the time of the narrative.

"Who is this who returns a man to his right mind? Who is this who commands demons? The author of Luke's gospel knows the answer and tells us, but it does not seem to settle the matter for everyone. It is in the nature of this man Jesus that he crosses borders, breaches boundaries and reaches out to all of humanity, and Luke is saying that the man who performed these feats among the *Gerasenes* in a Gentile region of the Sea of Galilee is no less than God himself.

**In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit,**

**Amen.**

(Sources: Tom Wright, *Luke for Everyone*, SPCK, London, 2001; The Rev. Amy Lindeman Allen, "*The Politics of Luke 8: 26-39*," *Political Theology*, 2013; Alyce McKenzie, "*My Name is Legion, What's Yours. Reflections on Luke 8: 26-39*," [www.patheos.com](http://www.patheos.com), 2013; Brian P. Stoffregen, "*Luke 8: 26-39, Proper 7-Year C*," Exegetical Notes, *Crossmarks*; Michael Rogness, "*Commentary on Luke 8: 26-39*," *Working Preacher*, 2013; Lucy Lind Hogan, "*Commentary on Luke 8: 26-39*," [www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=2865](http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2865).)