

“Jesus Casts Out Our Demons” Mark 5:1-20
by Josh Wallace March 11, 2018

§1 We are here today to cast out our demons.
Or we are here today to name our demons.
Or we are here today, at least, to admit that there are demons that dog us.

This is no easy passage for a preacher to preach. But there is good news here. There is good news for us today.

The one for whom John was waiting, the one for whom we were longing, the one more strong, more mighty has come to set us free. This is the story for us today.

§2 I suspect that when demons show up in stories, some may start to wonder if we’ve detoured into some pulp horror movie. Shadowy cinematography, jump scenes, poorly-written dialogue--clowns, creepy dolls, an isolated cabin in the woods--over-acted, campy direct-to-video kind of stuff.

Or maybe we start to feel truly uncomfortable. These Bible stories about demons sound too much like superstition--very unfortunate, even destructively superstitious ways of talking about mental illness. These are stories the world could do without.

Maybe these demon stories sound just spooky.

I remember being a nine year old at Bible camp. I loved that camp. I think this may have been my first year there. For some reason, our cabin counselor thought it’d be great to have our nightly devotions on spiritual warfare--angels, demons, all that stuff. For cabin devotions, at bedtime, in the profound dark of night in the Beartooth Mountains. Nine year old boys being nine year old boys, our stories and imaginations ran wild with this topic. None of us slept well that night. Not even the camp counselor, who had to work pretty hard to calm us all down.

§3 We meet this person with *an unclean spirit* in v 2 of Mk’s story. Whatever we feel about demon stories, there’s no getting around this individual. Jesus has crossed to the other side of the Sea of Galilee--to our side, the gentile side--and this possessed,

demonized man rushes toward him. Jesus barely has his feet on the sand, when this inconvenient, uncomfortable, spiritual reality confronts him, confronts us--this spiritual reality that makes us roll our eyes or grimace or feel a little anxious.

I don't think I can make this a comfortable story. I don't think I should. I don't think that's what God's doing here this morning. It's not comfortable to have evil or suffering or superstition or oppression come rushing out. It shouldn't be.

If we listen carefully to this story, however, we find that it doesn't really belong to Hollywood B movies or to over-eager camp counselors. Mk doesn't invite us to try to analyze and diagnose this suffering man's condition.

Instead Mk presents this whole scene with words more often found on the battlefield or in military outpost. We might not catch this all too easily. Maybe we pick up on the name the demon submits to Jesus, "*My name is Legion, for we are many*" (9). You might have a footnote or a bit in your study Bible that tells you that this was the technical term for an imperial military unit--a group of a few thousand soldiers.

But if we listen a little longer, with ears to hear and a maybe a commentary or two, we catch that there's actually a lot of military terminology here. We hear about a "band" of pigs in v 11. Now we may talk about flock of sheep or a herd of cattle. Not so much for pigs. People didn't say a "band of pigs" back then. What they did say was a "band of soldiers." In ancient Gk, that's where that word shows up.

There's more: Jesus' *dismisses* the demons in v 13, the same way soldiers standing at attention would be dismissed. The demons in the pigs *rush* down the cliff--just like Roman soldiers rushing an enemy line. The more you look, the more you see that Mk's placing this not in a superstitious conversation about mental health or ouija boards, but in a world of Roman military might and imperial occupation.

Or colonization, to be more precise. In fact, according to Mk, this is the real geographic, historical place this story takes place. V 1, Jesus crosses the Sea of Galilee to the country of the Gerasenes. We hear later that this is in an area called the Decapolis. Three hundred years earlier the Macedonian-Greek war machine commanded by Alexander the Great marched into this Aramean homeland on the far-side of the Sea of Galilee and obliterated the culture of the indigenous Semitic peoples. On top of their villages and communities, the Greeks built their cities, their temples, imported their

culture, their laws, propped it up with their violence and economic coercion. When the Romans arrived two centuries later, they merely changed the public branding. A new party in power, the same occupation. Now it was Roman gods, Roman emperors, Roman legions keeping the indigenous rabble in line.

§4 This isn't a story we're unfamiliar with. At least, I don't think so. A foreign power from beyond the sea marching in, overwhelming indigenous peoples, purposefully stamping out their culture.

I'm new to Canada, so I'm not in a position to tell your story. I need you to be my teachers. But I can say that this story reminds me much of the habits and policies of my home country, the United States. In the US of my childhood, these stories were often covered up, ignored, edited out the school curriculum. I grew up in a valley traveled by Blackfoot, Crow, Shoshone, and Nez Perce peoples. But this information rarely showed up in the classroom. If it did, it was when we covered the so-called "Indian Wars" of the late 1800s. Off the reservation, outside of kitsch dream catchers in tourist traps or a diorama at the museum, it's hard to tell that Montana has an indigenous past, let alone an indigenous present.

These are bits and pieces of my story that I'm working to recover. I cannot tell your stories. That's up to you. But maybe you can hear echoes of the Roman legions, the Greek cultural "school" system, here where we live now.

I cannot tell your story. I cannot explain the over-representation of Indigenous men and women in the corrections system. I can't explain recent decisions in the justice system. I can't explain these things.

I cannot explain the effects of the history of Settler and Indigenous peoples in Canada (or in the United States). I don't have the training or the wisdom to teach about histories of colonialism, imperialism, Manifest Destiny in the States and the treaties and the Indian Act here in Canada. I have no expertise when it comes to speaking about quote-unquote resource economies or global capitalism or a system built on extraction and expendability.

But I see the effects. You see them too.

An interesting fact: This is the longest miracle story in Mk. Mk gives more attention to this story than to any other one about Jesus healing or providing or setting free. If I were writing this Gospel, I might have given top billing to Jesus raising the dead, maybe making the blind see, or feeding five thousand people with a few fish. But this is Mk's Gospel.

And in this intense, unyielding story, a quarter of the vv are given to depict the effects being possessed has on this man. Vv 2 to 5. A long, unremitting look at what being occupied by this legion has done to this person. Look at what it has wrought-- occupation by the spirit of the age, the spirit of the empire, the military, the economy, the gods of the hills and high places compounded by the gods of Rome. He lives among the dead and in the wild; he is wild, violent without reason, without hope, no investment in living. He's chained and shackled, and though he batters his bonds apart, he can't escape the spirits that hold him captive. He runs howling, naked in the night, attacking his own body with rocks, wounding himself in cycles of self-destructive, self-loathing behavior. Fear, shame, loneliness, anger, violence, rage, bitterness, envy, powerlessness: Behold, the spirit of the age.

Maybe you know this story. Maybe it's yours. Maybe this is the story of someone you love. Again, I'm not in a place to tell your stories, your pain, the chains you can't shake loose. We've been addicted. We know what destructive, abusive control feels like in a relationship. We know both the rage and the giving up that come when hope is gone.

These are hard stories to share. They can be difficult stories to hear. We want to turn away. We want to edit them out, cover them up. They're not stories we advertise to new acquaintances; in fact, it's seldom that we'll share them even within the warm community of our church family. Whether it's our personal history or a reckoning with our communal or national history, we don't quite have the stomach for the long vv that Mk spends, gazing into the personal, social devastation wrought by these spirits.

§5 But if we do pause with Mk, with Jesus, there is good news. If we gaze into the swept aside realities of our common history, if we dare admit our personal wounds and bondage, we hear a word from the Bible. This is not easy. It is not fun. There is no joy in meeting this pain. But when we do, we find God here with us.

God, too, sees this pain. God, too, knows what the legion spirits, the demon imperialism, demon coercion, the demon robbery of land and culture, the demon addictions, abuses, the demon manipulations of the powerful on the powerless, the demon bending and binding of this world so that the few dwell in leisure while the multitude goes hungry for bread, the demon hopelessness, the demon despair--God sees what they have done. These vv and many others say God is here, seeing our pain--confronting it in the same voice that a paragraph earlier stilled the howling winds on the Sea of Galilee. God comes--Jesus comes--to cast these demons out.

The story races to catch up with this fact. Even before we can fully understand or even adequately see all our pain, all our bondage, all our wounds, Jesus commands the spirits that occupy and torment us to come out. While the spirits run headlong to ward off Jesus, v 7, sputtering and spitting their defenses, their threats, their excuses, Jesus has, v 8, already commanded, "*Come out of this person, you unclean spirit!*" Already. From the first moment. This is God's always-and-already word for the demons that devastate us and our communities.

In Mk's story, what does God's Word do? He breaks the invisible, unbreakable chains. He breaks the grip of the legion spirits. He dismisses them with a word--and watch the destruction in their hearts, revealed in the pigs charging headlong to destruction. And the man, the man with his wounds, his voice rough from his cries of anguish--we see him *clothed*, his *mind made sound*, *seated* with Jesus--a position of honor and rest. Freedom, healing, restoration. As Jesus tells it back in ch 3, Jesus is the stronger one, the liberator. He has bound the legion spirits that have occupied the homes, hearts, and culture of every nations. He is God's Word: "*Come out!*"

§6 Maybe you hear this story differently today. There are a few places we can stand in this story. In all of them, what we hear is God's word of release, God's down payment on the promise of redemption. But it sounds different depending on where you stand.

1) Some of us stand with this man who roved among the tombs. I think that's the way I've mainly told the story this morning. We have reminders all around us of what the spirits of the age, the spirits that haunt us, do. We know they bring death. We can feel it; we can see the marks on our bodies, on the bodies and minds of those we love.

Jesus comes and speaks release, healing, resurrection. And, like the man in the story, what our heart of hearts wants most, then, is to be near Jesus. He is our security, our warmth and comfort, our healing. We are Mary Magdalene, set free from seven demons and firstmost among the apostles, day-by-day sitting at Jesus' feet, because we love the one who frees us.

2) Others of us find this story upsetting, uncomfortable. Maybe we're like the neighbors, the townsfolk and countryfolk who come running to see what happened. You heard how the story ends. They nervously plead with Jesus to leave them, let them be.

Strangely, we hear a kind of played-in-reverse echo of this from the mouth of the spirits themselves--pleading with Jesus *not* to be sent away. Both plead with Jesus not to upset the way things are, not to overturn the status quo system --the legions loose in the land, the schools and stadiums and political platforms all telling the same story, prejudices and hopelessness chaining and battering human hearts. "No, Jesus, don't touch that. Don't upset us. The swine economy is good. The Romans, they don't really treat us that bad. The folks who get hurt or tramped on, they usually have it coming. Jesus, just let it be, please."

Maybe both voices sound in our hearts. We can feel these wounds, feel the weight of these invisible chains, but we're not sure freedom or healing is worth the cost. It's funny, we never hear who this man was before the spirits set to work on his life. Was he a peasant, crushed and pushed beyond reason and hope? Or had he been a legionnaire, an occupier, soldier at the frontlines of cultural conquest and domination? Maybe he could hear both voices too.

Though Jesus climbs back into his boat, he doesn't leave Gerasa and the Decapolis and the occupied peoples of the Empire without hope. He sends the man out to promise his return, to tell the good news of God Most High, that freedom is coming, and every tyrant spirit be cast down. "*The time is here; the kingdom of God draws near. Repent, believe the good news.*" (1.15)

I always wonder how I--privileged and prejudiced--how I am supposed to hear those words.

3) Last, there's Jesus' disciples. They're there. But they don't say much. They say nothing, do nothing. But they watch.

I'm not sure what to make of them, maybe because I'm often standing there among them. I imagine they feel bewildered, out of their depth. Demons and spirits, oppression, occupation, prejudice, structural injustice and personal devastation--we don't know what to do with that. What's the right answer? So we stand there, feeling awkward and somewhat guilty.

But then here's Jesus. And he shows us what to do. And as we watch him, we ever so slowly become like him, reflecting the glorious freedom of God displayed in the face of Christ. We watch, we listen, we obey his commands, and we begin to live as he does. We begin to bring the kingdom, the freedom of God to all those places the unclean spirits of our age reign tyrannical. We learn to say, too, *The Spirit of the Lord is upon, for he anointed me to bring good news to the poor, ... release to the captives, ... recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free* (Lk 4.18).

Like Jesus, we name our demons, and then we cast them out. Amen.

St Patrick's Breastplate - A Blessing

Against the demon snares of sin,
The vice that gives temptation force,
The natural lusts that war within,
The hostile men that mar your course;
Or few or many, far or nigh,
In every place and in all hours,
Against their fierce hostility,
Bind to us, O Lord, your holy power.

Christ be with us, Christ within us,
Christ behind us, Christ before us,
Christ beside us, Christ to win us,
Christ to comfort and restore us.
Christ beneath us, Christ above us,
Christ in quiet, Christ in danger,
Christ in hearts of all that love us,
Christ in mouth of friend and stranger.
