

“The Madmen and the Pigs”

Introduction: Last time, as we overheard conversations Jesus had with two would-be followers, and then saw the storm that his current followers encountered, we considered the reality that following Jesus is not always going to be easy, comfortable or straightforward, nor would it be storm free. And yet, who else has the power and authority to calm the wind and the waves? “What kind of man is this?” is the question the disciples left us to ponder, and is one they themselves would continue to ponder.

As we see their boat this morning land on the opposite shore, in Gentile territory, and as we meet some madmen and a herd of pigs, we are invited to reflect further on this question. Jesus, we will see, performs another amazing healing, bringing the madmen back to their right mind, but the townsfolk end up wanting him to go away! What’s up with that?! Sometimes, it seems, Jesus is just too hot to handle! Those who recognize his power and authority may still want nothing to do with him. Are we willing to let Jesus be Jesus, even when, and especially when, it becomes clear that we cannot control him?

I. The Place

A. This text raises several questions so let’s begin by understanding where Jesus landed. The Gadarenes, on the southeastern shore of the Sea of Galilee, was Gentile territory. This is affirmed by the fact that some of these folks were keeping pigs, an animal which Jews regarded as unclean. All of which made this landing spot somewhat questionable for the disciples. Why, they must have wondered, would Jesus come to this unclean place, filled with unclean people? Only Jesus seems to have gotten out of the boat (cf. Mk. 5:2). Were the disciples afraid, uninterested, or even angry? The Jews wanted to drive the Gentiles into the heart of the sea. Jesus, it seemed, had other plans.

B. One thing becomes clear the more one hangs around with Jesus: He is intensely persistent in loving those considered to be unlovable. There is no doubt in his mind that the Kingdom of God, as he proclaims and makes it available, extends to all, even unclean Gentiles.

II. The Madmen

A. When Jesus gets out of the boat, he comes face to face with men who everyone else avoided. They were, as the text describes them, “demon-possessed,” and so violent that no one dared go near them. In his account, Mark adds that these fellows had been chained hand and foot but kept breaking the chains; no one was able to subdue them. Night and day they cried out and cut themselves with stones (Mk. 5:4f).

No doubt we struggle a bit with what this means. Modern Western medicine has come up with all sorts of alternative diagnoses, or descriptions of mental illness, but the reality that these men have been taken over by forces beyond their control may just be the best explanation. If the wind and the waves we met last week represented chaos and evil, then these men reveal what it looks like when chaos and evil take up residence inside a human being.

Illustration: It turns out that during WWII, the British poet, W. H. Auden lived in the German section of NYC. One day he attended a propaganda film regarding the Nazi invasion of Poland. When pictures of Polish people appeared on the screen, many of his German neighbors – folks he considered to be reasonably good people – stood up and shouted, “Kill them! Kill them!” Auden was stunned. On that day,

he lost his faith in atheism for he realized that nothing in his belief system could account for such horrific human behavior. Unless he believed in the presence and power of evil, he couldn't see how seemingly good people could be sucked into such horrible behavior.

B. It's impossible to account for all of the bad stuff in our world simply by blaming human mistakes or bad choices or a lousy upbringing or lack of education or the capitalist system. There is a personal power of evil, the biblical writers explain, that seeks to oppose and warp the good creation of God at every turn. One of the subtle ways that evil works we've been learning about in our table talk discussions. Evil seeks to isolate individuals, removing them from the goodness of community that human beings were created to enjoy. Loneliness, multiple studies have revealed, is in fact lethal.

As Nicholas Kristoff put it in a recent NYT article (9/6/23), loneliness crushes the soul and breaks the heart, literally! It is linked to strokes, heart disease, dementia, inflammation, and suicide. The surgeon general adds that loneliness is more deadly than smoking 15 cigarettes a day or consuming 6 alcoholic drinks. So, what better way to oppose the goodness of God and his creation by afflicting those he has created in ways that cause them to be removed from society, as these two men so obviously had (as was the leper, the servant, and Peter's mother-in-law [Ma. 8:1-15]), forcing them to live alone in tombs, most likely caves, but still places of death.

C. Interesting that when Jesus arrived on the scene the demons who had taken up residence in these men recognized him, even identifying him by the title they shouted out, "Son of God." And then perhaps an even more important question: "Have you come to torture us before the appointed time?" Or as Eugene Peterson has it (Msg): "You weren't supposed to show up here yet!" Significantly, this reveals that the authority of these demons, whatever it was, was not greater than that of Jesus. They have great power but not unlimited power.

There is a time to come when evil will be completely and thoroughly judged. That Jesus had begun that judgment, "before the appointed time," these demons recognized, is a small but real sign that the kingdom of God has begun to break into our world, that God's will is being done on earth as it is in heaven. The judgment of evil by Jesus in this instance is an anticipation of a fuller judgment to come, and therefore a part of the ground of our hope as we consider all of the evil that still roams around and does its destructive best to oppose the goodness of God. Evil will not win. Although no one had been able to subdue these demons, Jesus could, and Jesus would.

### III. The Pigs – 3 "Go's"

A. Not that it makes this bit about the pigs any easier to understand! With a word, "Go!" Jesus causes the demons to come out of the men and into the pigs. It's what the demons requested, and it seems odd that Jesus would agree. At the very least, it destroyed a good herd from which a farmer could have made money. As a commentator named Michael Green observes, "Much ink and compassion have been spilled upon the pigs by scholars who no doubt enjoy their bacon for breakfast!" But perhaps Jesus wants us to recognize that no amount of wealth is more important than one healed and restored man. In fact, it may point out that love of possessions is one of the things evil uses to lure us away from Jesus. As had been said, "Throughout the ages the world has been refusing Jesus because it prefers its pigs." And maybe Jesus is simply providing a graphic picture of what the ultimate end of the demons will be, as he affirmed for the madmen that they were now gloriously free.

B. Not everyone in that town agreed. In fact, we hear a second “Go!” as the townsfolk plead with Jesus to leave them. How could they not appreciate what he had done? The fact of the matter is that even the demons knew of the power and authority of Jesus, but they refused to bow down to him. Maybe it should cause us to consider that Jesus is not just someone with good ideas and a kind heart. Nor is he someone we can lure to support our pet projects or agendas or theologies. We can’t control him. He won’t bend to our wishes. He’s simply too hot to handle.

C. And yet we can trust Jesus with every aspect of our life as he’s shown total and complete control over disease both near and far, over nature, and now over evil. In a third “Go!”, which we see in Mark’s account, Jesus tells one of these men who wanted to get into the boat and go with him to go home instead and share the good news with his family: “Go home to your own people and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and how he has had mercy on you” (Mk. 5:19). Go, in other words, and declare among your people that the Lord is at work, that his mercy is great, and that the kingdom of God is at hand and available to all. There is no more powerful proclamation of the good news than that of an intimate, personal sharing of what the Lord has done in us.