

*In the name of God, who makes us, loves us, and keeps us. Amen*

This story of casting out demons and the strange reaction of the people who witnessed the event is indeed a bizarre one. Like some low budget horror film, it tells a frightening tale of demonic possession, violence, fear, a clash of powers both magical and somehow spiritual. Jesus as exorcist. Exorcism as healing. The power of Jesus revealed. The power of Jesus to disturb and startle. Jesus being asked to please leave. But as weird as it is, there is teaching in its narrative for Christians, for us, though we may need to read a bit between the lines. We need to bring ourselves up-to-speed with some things Luke's readers, his audience, would have known at the time. And, like this creepy story, it begins with geography, and it begins a few verses earlier than we just heard in Chapter eight of Luke's book: One day Jesus said to his disciples, "Let us go over to the other side of the lake." So they got into a boat and set out. As they sailed, he fell asleep. A squall came down on the lake, so that the boat was being swamped, and they were in great danger. The disciples went and woke him, saying, "Master, Master, we're going to drown!" He got up and rebuked the wind and the raging waters; the storm subsided, and all was calm. "Where is your faith?" he asked his disciples. In fear and amazement they asked one another, "Who is this? He commands even the winds and the water, and they obey him."

And they sailed all night, across the lake, and in the morning they arrived in the land of the Gerasenes, and Jesus stepped off the boat, as his foot stepped onto land, he entered the region of the Decapolis! This was apparently the first time he had truly entered a foreign land, a land where Judaism was not the common religion, where Aramaic Hebrew was not the preferred language, and where there was a real question of whether or not he and the disciples would be welcome. The Decapolis, as it was called, was an area dominated by 10 or more city-states which had been carved out of the wilderness during the later years of Alexander the Great, some 200 years before. They had been colonized by Greek-speaking settlers and retired military leaders, who brought their brand of civilization to the wilderness, and who displaced the nomadic, more Semitic, tribes who made their homes there. And now, in Jesus' day, these cities enjoyed a certain independence from the Roman Empire and its legions, for they protected the Eastern trade routes and mirrored the same Greco-Roman values. They were mostly in modern-day Jordan, like the city of Amman, but included the city-state of Damascus in Syria.

Luke's audience, the first people who heard or read his Gospel, would have known all this. They would have been aware of the cities of the Decapolis, their temples to the ancient Gods, their worship of multiple deities, their condescension toward Jewish traditions and religious teachings, their arrogance and their sin. They raised pigs and ate pork, they sacrificed to jealous Gods, and they worshiped the Roman emperors, too. And they thought that monotheism, the worship of one God, was absurd. Their legendary and mythical gods were characterized by intrigue, envy, secretive alliances, deceit, and power struggles of their own, and they treated human beings as pawns in their Olympian games. They were both heroes and villains, something like humans with superpowers, but not necessarily creative and redemptive; more sanctimonious than sanctifying. And the civilizations which worshiped them were, as often as not, chaotic. Do you remember the gospel story of the Prodigal Son, the young man in Jesus' parable who takes his share of his inheritance, leaves his father and brother behind, and travels to a "distant country" to find fame and fortune? It is thought that Jesus meant that distant country to be in one of the cities of the Decapolis. And remember the misery that young man found there? He squanders his treasure there in the riotous living typical of that place, and winds up feeding pigs, of all things, and wishing he had such food as they.

It is into the chaos of such a place that Jesus places his foot in our Bible story, and he is met on shore immediately by the possessed man and the legions of demons who have taken up residence in his mind and body. Despite their efforts, the people of that place cannot keep the man from terrorizing the neighborhood

by shouting loud gibberish and committing random acts of violence. They cannot keep him clothed or chained or lure him to live outside the cemetery. His chaotic insanity is frightening. But when Jesus arrives, bringing the presence of God into this godless place, he brings peace, as he always does. And God's peace always supplants chaos. From the very beginning, from the symbolic seven days of creation, God's will has brought the structure of peace into the chaotic void. And, according to our scriptures, Jesus has been there the whole time...even as everything was just beginning. And now, on this distant shore, Jesus brings peace. Just as he had calmed the storm out on the lake, like a bridge over troubled waters, Jesus brings hopeful peace to this troubled shore. Meanwhile, the insanity which has shrouded that place is sent into a suicidal stampede of swine, of all things. As it turns out, the insanity, the sin, of the arrogant Decapolis can, in fact, be cured by faith.

But it is all too much for the people there. The startling power that it takes to redeem this man and his community is itself frightening to a faithless people. They would rather have the relative comfort of their own traditions and superstitions rather than receive and accept some new magic. They are unready and unwilling to see God's benevolent and redemptive Spirit and convert to it; they are afraid to let it into their hearts. So, they politely, yet insistently, ask Jesus to please leave. And take his disciples with him. And maybe the former Wildman too, please?? So, this man who has been redeemed from disastrous possession is now sitting among the disciples, in his right mind, calm and collected and clothed, having a good chat, thinks this is a grand idea, too. Let me go along with you. Get me out of this place where my reputation is shot! Let me sail away with you all to somewhere else beyond all my awful memories. Will you please, Jesus, receive me as one of your posse? Take me along on your adventures? Keep me in God's saving presence? By the power of the Holy Spirit keep me in eternal life? But, curiously, Jesus says "no".

There may be many ways to explain Jesus' decision to leave this man behind, but my own theory is that it was a tip-of-the-hat to the new Christian churches which would subsequently grow up in this area. By the time Luke wrote his Gospel, some 40 or 50 years after Jesus had visited the Decapolis, the area had been evangelized by Paul and others, and had ironically, become a stronghold for the new "way". Jordan and Syria became centers of Christianity, while Christians were been thrown out of the synagogues in Jerusalem and Judea as heretics. This man, Luke might have thought, was representative of the missionaries who would penetrate that land where the old false gods of the Romans and Greeks had once demanded such loyalty. What, leave?! No, you stay here and tell the story. You stay here and be a witness to God's powerful healing presence. This is fertile territory for God's kingdom, even if your neighbors don't see it that way yet, even though they haven't yet seen the light.

So, what can this story tell us about ourselves and the world in which we live? How can it inform our own lives? You know, this great building of ours is like a ship. Heritage tells us that the early Christians thought of their buildings as cruise ships to heaven. They considered themselves to be on Noah's Ark when they gathered in such a place. We call this structure the nave, don't we; as in Navy, right? So, when we step ashore, when we place our feet on the land outside this building, what happens? Could it be that the first thing we might expect to meet is a representative of the insanity of this world? Or is the insanity, the sin, cleverly hidden from us beneath layers of respectability? Are there false gods out there? Is there idolatry for narcotics, for pornography, for greed, for lustful power, for discriminating arrogance, for false pride? Are these the ancient gods which still demand such loyalty...even here in our own neighborhood? When our feet touch the pavement, when the rubber meets the road, what would Jesus have us do? Are we to be exorcists? Are we to be saviors? Well, to begin with, I think, we should bring peace, as Jesus always did. But this story from Luke's gospel certainly does give us much to consider. And, as faithful, prayerful people, these troubled shores in our own civilization should always be on our minds and in our hearts. Perhaps we should seriously think about being like the man who has been cured and who by grace has been saved. Perhaps, dear friends, we should stick around and stick close, that we might persistently and enthusiastically witness to God's love in this neighborhood. Amen