

“That Weird Episode with the Pigs”

That title isn't my own, I came across it while preparing for today's message. I liked that and thought it most fitting because this *is* a weird and tricky story...kind of uncomfortable too for our so-called scientific minds. What do we do with a story about a man possessed by demons? Would we simply diagnose his condition differently today and thereby dispense with any need for reference to evil spirit beings, or is it possible that in the reality of the spiritual realm there are indeed evil forces working *against* the will of God and *for* the destruction of His beloved creation, not least humanity.

It is possible, of course, that some conditions understood as demonic in Bible times would be more accurately diagnosed as mental illness today. Or a more fitting scientific explanation may be found for symptoms that were once inexplicable. Does this render all references to demonic activity in the Bible as simply a of a kind of ignorance consistent with the day? I don't believe so. While I happily review long-standing interpretations of Scripture in the light of new scholarship and understandings, it remains a common experience of ancients and moderns alike that from time to time unexplained terrors create enormous emotional, and at times, physical, havoc in the lives of individuals and communities.

It's also never seemed to me to be a very big jump once we've embraced faith in God, and subsequently belief in a spiritual realm. Also noteworthy, is how difficulties with the idea of the supernatural, angels, and demons and the like is not consistent across all cultures. If we step back from the cultural forces which have shaped us and consider the wisdom and insights present in other cultures, we may find that at points they help us read Scripture better than we do with our so-called modern minds.

Gregory Boyd says that “This episode must be understood in the context of the cosmic battle that Jesus was involved in throughout His ministry.” And this battle is quite apparent in this 8th chapter of Luke. In the verses just before today's passage Jesus has demonstrated his authority by calming a raging storm at sea, and then after casting out the demons from the Gerasene man, He goes on to heal the woman with twelve years of haemorrhaging, and then He raises Jairus's daughter from the dead.

Once again we're confronted with the idea that Jesus' came to usher in the kingdom of God. He came precisely to challenge the kingdom of darkness and begin the restoration of all things. So much more than merely a good moral teacher, Jesus' presence on earth was deeply threatening to evil powers because He meant to overthrow them. In the lead up to His death and resurrection we're observing these miracles as glimpses of the kingdom, evidence for who Jesus is and what He'd come to do. And by His death and resurrection He *did* triumph over the powers of darkness, He won the battle and secured the hope of total restoration in the fullness of time.

But, I'm getting ahead of myself – back to our story, but still on the theme. The lectionary commentary had this to say,

We dare not downplay the element of conflict.... It is the nature of Jesus' authority that He threatens inhumane and oppressive powers, sometimes directly, sometimes subversively. Not every individual or institution is ready for the overhaul that Jesus always brings.

In our story today Jesus takes on the oppressive powers in this man's life and He defeats them. In verse 36 the man is described and having been "healed" and the word translated "healed" is from the Greek *sozo*. *Sozo* can also be translated "saved," "delivered," or "made whole." So, what Jesus accomplishes in this man's life is more than just his deliverance from a demon or his being cured of a terrible burden, he had been altogether "healed" and "saved." Jesus demonstrated in this man's life what He meant, what He means, to do for all people who allow Him to, and for all of His creation still in the grip of the powers of darkness. This is what the kingdom of God looks like, the hope of healing and salvation – in its broadest sense - for all.

Speaking of *all*, it's most noteworthy exactly where this deliverance takes place. I say exactly, but the exact location remains elusive. Nonetheless, the presence of pigs feeding on the hillside makes it plain that we're in a predominantly Gentile region, and therefore, that the man healed was a non-Jew. Jesus makes it clear at points that He has come for the House of Israel first, that being so, there are these wonderful breakouts that point to where all of this is heading. When Jesus heals the Gerasene man His saving arm reaches beyond the national bounds of Judaism and anticipates the broader mission to the Gentiles...the other...which is so prominent in the book of Acts. Jesus may have begun with the Jews, but His message was always meant for all the world.

Just on the pigs...this is tricky for us today where it seems as though Jesus showed callous disregard for the welfare of these animals. I came across a number of attempts at explaining this situation so that it might sit more easily with us but I mostly found them unsatisfying. The best explanation was the article I referred to at the start called "That Weird Episode with the Pigs." I don't really have time to expand on that here but if you'd like me to forward you an electronic copy of that article via email please let me know after the service, or I can print a paper copy for those who don't have email.

The other mystifying aspect of this story is the response of the villagers. I don't know about you, but if I'd observed a crazed man living naked in a cemetery, breaking shackles and demonstrating superhuman strength over many years; then I turned up one day and he was suddenly transformed into a calm, apparently well, fully-clothed man, I'd be most anxious to know who was responsible for this remarkable transformation, and I reckon I'd be thinking that person was pretty marvellous!

But these villagers, they wanted nothing to do with Jesus. They were terrified by what had taken place and just wanted Him gone. They had tolerated this frightening, demon-possessed man in their midst for years, but as soon as Jesus turned up and healed him, Jesus was the one they sent away.

Now there are two possible explanations that may have contributed to the villagers' fears. One, of course was the destruction of the herd of pigs. This was no doubt a rather disturbing thing to observe, however the villagers' concerns likely centred around the financial impact of what had taken place. The swine herdsman would have experienced significant financial loss that day. What if Jesus performed other acts of kindness and healing which further threatened their economic

security? The demonised man's suffering was an acceptable cost for keeping things just as they were.

Secondly, there were, apparently, certain Greek conceptions of dangerous wonderworking magicians whom most people feared. Note, however, that Jesus encourages the healed man to "Return to [his] home, and declare what *God has done* for you." Jesus wants it to be clear that He is no magician, He has done what He has done by the power of God.

Could it be that the presence and power of God were what evoked such fear in the villagers? Makes you wonder how we might experience Jesus if He turned up physically present in our midst one Sunday...what are the chances that we'd likewise feel some disquiet at just what Jesus might do...what might He ask of us...what of our hearts might He expose?

If we're just a little unsettled at the thought, how much more the people of the Gerasenes in Luke 8? One commentator offered this, "The thing about having the one true God in your midst is you have this feeling that the incident with the pigs could be just the tip of this divine iceberg. Who know what would be next but it's surely not beyond the realm of possibility that this Jesus person, the Son of the Most High God, could end up shaking up **everything** and that is, well, a frightening thought for most people." Too right it is?!?!

It's easier to stay the same isn't it - even if the same is not all that great - than to let someone put us through the wringer or confront us with this or that truth about our lives or this culture or this world that we'd rather not know. For the people of the Gerasenes, life with a demon-possessed crazy man was no picnic. But as they say, better the devil you know...than the God you don't know but who looks to promise a whole lot of change that just maybe it's easier not to do.

Of course, when God shows up to shake things up it is ultimately an act of grace for our good. It's easy to see that God's deliverance of the miserable demoniac was an act of grace, but so are the other things which Jesus wishes to do in and for us. It may not always appear to be the case at the outset, but when we know Him to be loving and good, then we know that everything He does is loving and good.

I was really struck as I spent time in this passage, that I don't want to be like the Gerasene villagers. I don't want to resist or reject Jesus because He threatens to unsettle my well-constructed life and identity. If He would transform my life in the same measure as a demon-crazed person then I want that! I want it for me and I want it for others' whose lives intersect with mine, because I know when Jesus deals with me, I'm always the better for it. I'm also confident that along with those aspects which are confronting and possibly painful, Jesus is gentle and kind in His dealings with us. We are surely in the securest of hands.