

What has God Done & What Do I Say

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Gospel: Luke 8:26-39

Jesus' mission includes foreigners & his authority extends to the casting out of demons. Some who witness Jesus' work are seized with confusion & fear, but the man who was healed is commissioned to give testimony to God's mercy & power.

²⁶Then Jesus & his disciples arrived at the country of the Gerasenes, which is opposite Galilee. ²⁷As Jesus stepped out on land, a man of the city who had demons met him. For a long time he had worn no clothes, & he did not live in a house but in the tombs. ²⁸When he saw Jesus, he fell down before him & shouted at the top of his voice, "What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I beg you, do not torment me"—²⁹for Jesus had commanded the unclean spirit to come out of the man. (For many times it had seized him; he was kept under guard & bound with chains & shackles, but he would break the bonds & be driven by the demon into the wilds.) ³⁰Jesus then asked him, "What is your name?" He said, "Legion"; for many demons had entered him. ³¹The demons begged Jesus not to order them to go back into the abyss. ²Now there on the hillside a large herd of swine was feeding; & the demons begged Jesus to let them enter these. So Jesus gave them permission. ³³Then the demons came out of the man & entered the swine, & the herd rushed down the steep bank into the lake & was drowned. ³⁴When the swineherds saw what had happened, they ran off & told it in the city & in the country. ³⁵Then people came out to see what had happened, & when they came to Jesus, they found the man from whom the demons had gone sitting at the feet of Jesus, clothed & in his right mind. & they were afraid. ³⁶Those who had seen it told them how the one who had been possessed by demons had been healed. ³⁷Then all the people of the surrounding country of the Gerasenes asked Jesus to leave them; for they were seized with great fear. So he got into the boat & returned. ³⁸The man from whom the demons had gone begged that he might be with Jesus; but Jesus sent him away, saying, ³⁹"Return to your home, & declare how much God has done for you." So he went away, proclaiming throughout the city how much Jesus had done for him.

Overview - Proclaiming How Much Jesus Has Done

We feel powerless when life's storms rage about us. Despite our best efforts, we cannot navigate those dangers without the hand of God to guide & free us. In the gospel, the man with demons was unable to help himself. His affliction had caused him to be chained & shackled by his community. Yet even that could not control the raging

evil within him. He remained helpless & ostracized on his own until he was emancipated by the power of God in Christ. Even though he was an outsider from the land of the Gerasene's, Jesus came to his aid. He cast out the legion of demons in the man & sent them into the nearby herd of pigs, who then flung themselves off the bank. Though that dramatic event caused fear & confusion, the man was at last set free & commissioned by Jesus as a witness to his stunning liberation. Together, today's texts recount the journey of faith from bondage to freedom, from separation to unity, from death to new life. & this is a path open to all, no matter who we are or from whence we've come. The scriptures energize us to join that man in the gospel who went out proclaiming "how much Jesus had done for him," even to those who would rather not hear it.

Theological Reflection

Jesus' presence brings change to individuals & communities. For the community of the Gerasenes, Jesus altered the social standing of the now-healed man, the community's relationship to the man, the lives of the people who made a living from the pigs, & others who are not named in the text. The status quo cannot exist in the same space with Jesus' powerful presence. Embracing the changes that come with Christ's active presence in our churches & in our lives is the real work of living faithfully.

Book

"Healing requires a cleaning out of the wounds. & this is painful. It's messy. It can lead us to think, again & again, that we just want to go back to the way things were. We know how to survive in the brokenness. But I no longer wanted to simply survive. I wanted to thrive. When we get a glimpse of how life can be, of the joy & fullness & passion that's part of a life that has been restored to wholeness, it's hard to go back to the way things were" (Rozella Haydée White, *Love Big: The Power of Revolutionary Relationships to Heal the World* [Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2019], p. 68). Through Isaiah, God invites the returned exiles into a better way of living. To enjoy that better way, they must let go of their habits of surviving & take up habits for thriving.

TV Show

In the television show *The Big Bang Theory*, the character Sheldon Cooper is characterized as "quirky" but is a good example of a neurodivergent person who tries to function in a world that is not always understandable. In "The Itchy Brain Simulation"

(season 7, episode 8), Sheldon's roommate Leonard wears an uncomfortable sweater while undertaking an impossible task to better understand how Sheldon feels about unresolved issues. Walking alongside people in their difficulties, as opposed to dismissing such struggles, is one way to exorcise the demons of loneliness & social anxiety.

Luke 8:26-39

Luke's gospel, written in the 80s, situated Jesus' ministry first in Jerusalem & mainly in Galilee, from which the word then goes out (Book of Acts) to all the Roman Empire & beyond. This miracle story, edited from the earlier version in Mark 5:1-20, takes place near Galilee, across the Jordan, which was Gentile territory: thus the pig herding. The gospels identify demons with a wide range of physical or mental illness: this man acts mentally deranged & uncontrollable. As in Mark 1:21-28, this man's demons recognize Jesus for who he is. Luke makes of the healed man an evangelist. Legion, a vast number, was also the name of a military unit of 6000 Roman soldiers. The abyss refers to the realm of the dead or of Satan. For Jewish readers of the gospels, the destruction of the unclean pigs would be welcome. The engaging narrative challenges Luke's Gentile audience: will they beg Jesus to leave, or will they proclaim him the Son of the Most High God? Situated in an alien worldview, in which for example demons cause insanity, talk with Jesus, & reside in an underground level of the earth, the graphic pig story may strike us as somewhat comic. Yet the narrative calls us to join the madman in acclaiming Christ as Son of God &, now that we are healed, in telling others what Jesus has done for us. The white robe of our baptism is like the clothing in which we sit at the feet of Jesus.

Luke 8:26-39

Jesus & his disciples arrive in Gerasa, a city some 30 km east of the Jordan – in Gentile territory. Ancient ideas of dementia were very different from ours: demons were spirits of an evil kind, thought to do battle, as a “legion” (v. [30](#)), with God & his allies; they were thought to invade human bodies & personalities, causing mental (& some physical) illness, & taking control of people; “the wilds” (v. [29](#), the desert) was the abode of demons & destructive forces; “the abyss” (v. [31](#)) was the realm of Satan & home to demons. People who had been deprived of their liberty (e.g. prisoners) lost the right to wear clothes. “Tombs” (v. [27](#)) were ritually unclean places. Jesus has power over evil forces (“fell down”, v. [28](#); “commanded”, v. [29](#)). The man recognizes Jesus for whom he is. “Swine” (v. [32](#)) were a symbol of pagan religion & of Roman rule: even they are subject to Jesus' authority. Perhaps Luke predicts the fall of Rome

in telling the fate of the swine (v. [33](#)): that Roman *legions* will drown. The man not only sits “at the feet of Jesus” (v. [35](#)), as disciples did, but becomes a missionary to fellow Gentiles (v. [39](#)). This is a story of transformation; so dramatic is the change in the man that the people are “seized with ... fear” (v. [37](#)): they can’t handle it. What does Luke mean by “had been healed” (v. [36](#)) or *saved*? Look at the changes in the man’s life: from outside the city to inside it; from living in tombs & being driven into the desert to living in a house; from nakedness to being clothed; & from being demented to being of sound mind. From destructive isolation, he has become part of a nurturing, human community. He proclaims the good news. To Luke, a “house” (v. [27](#)) is a home where one belongs, is a person, interacts with others, & exercises personal & communal rights & obligations, including moral ones.

What Does the Text Say?

Luke’s account emphasizes that Jesus has moved into foreign territory. The Gerasene’s country is “opposite Galilee.” This whole encounter takes place only after Jesus “stepped out” onto the Gentile side of the lake. (No Jewish farmer would have a herd of pigs.) The one possessed by demons is almost certainly a Gentile as well. Jesus quickly overpowers the sarcastic, sadistic spirit speaking from the possessed man. Legion knew immediately of their impending doom, for they begged Jesus not to “order them to go back into the abyss” (v. 31). This “abyss” was the designated place of punishment & imprisonment for demons (Revelation 20:1-3). As an unclean spirit, it was only natural that Legion request relocation into one of the most familiar of symbols for uncleanness — swine. Surprisingly, Jesus grants Legion’s request. The beasts go mad & plunge headlong into the depths of the lake. The people, hearing this, are “seized with great fear” (v. 37). They ask Jesus to leave (v. 37). Why the fear? Was it uncertainty over the demons’ complete & permanent demise in the lake? Was it anger over the loss of a large & valuable herd of livestock? Jesus’ own reaction to the request that he leave reveals the most about the situation. Without any further comment to the crowd, Jesus turned his back on the Gentiles, “got into the boat & returned” (v. 37). Everyone has the right to choose. They choose fear over faith. Luke ends the story by returning to a private dialogue shared between Jesus & the man he has healed. Now fully in his right mind, in his own mind, the man begs to be made a part of Jesus’ team, to “be with him” (v. 38). But, while Jesus refuses to allow the Gerasene to stay with him, he completes the man’s rehabilitation. Jesus orders the Gerasene to return to his former home. & Jesus calls him to a new vocation, giving purpose & point to this man’s now unfettered mind & unfurled spirit. Under Jesus’ direct instruction, the Gerasene demoniac becomes the first missionary to the Gentiles.

Images in the Readings

Clothing the naked is one image for baptism. Evidence suggests that in the church's early centuries candidates were indeed baptized naked & then clothed in white. Contemporary albs are such white garments worn by the baptized. Some assemblies clothe their newly baptized in white, & at least infants can be baptized naked & thus become symbols for us all. This story recalls Genesis 3, in which God presumably kills some animals to get their skins to make clothes for the naked man & woman. In the parable of the prodigal son, the forgiving father clothes his son in "the best" robe. As well, clothing the naked is often cited in the New Testament as one task given to the Christian community. Scholars have suggested various proposals behind the original purpose behind the Old Testament's kosher laws, which rendered **pigs** unclean. Anthropologists write that all cultures define what is appropriate for their tribe by delineating also what is alien, harmful, unclean. Jewish readers of this story (Mark 5:1-20, Matt. 8:28-34, Luke 8:26-39) may have noted that Jesus is more kind to the demons than to the pigs. These readings are filled with reference to **outsiders**: Canaanite religious practice, a naked madman, a cemetery, the Roman legions, a swineherd. It is not surprising that many slaveholders of the pre-bellum South did not allow their slaves to be baptized, for that would have rendered the slave as one with the slave-owner.

Connections with the Liturgy

In the sending at the close of each service of Holy Communion (*ELW*, p. 96), we are sent to return to our home & declare how much God has done for us. "Go in peace. Share the good news."

Life on the Earth

Human cultures are adept at separating the clean from the unclean, the sheep from the pigs, the town in which we live from the tombs of the dead. American society has gone further in resisting any connection with the dead, even now avoiding the words "die, death, dead." Death is an essential part of the life God created. Today, the madman who lived in the cemetery challenges us: how ought we to be dealing with the fact of death? Christians give their dead into the hands of God: how will this alter our approach to death & to the dead themselves?

Ideas from the Text:

1. Review what, “God has done” for you. Often, it is difficult to be specific because our relationship with God is not really connected to our daily lives. If you do not feel that daily connection, what do you need to do in order to make that so? Talk with pastor if you need to.

2. Look for opportunities to glorify God where you are. We do so constantly in our actions and how we treat others and our decisions, etc.....yet how do we share this also through the stories we tell, the teaching moments we offer, the interactions we have, the gifts we give, etc.?

3. In the words, “Return home,” we have some advice about recovering our core values. When is the last time you reviewed these? Wrote some down? Put them up around your home?

4. The essential aspect of witnessing is not to rack up “conversions”, but to tell people that God is great. When we “proclaim ... how much God has done” for us, the conversions will come by the work of the Holy Spirit. Our ministry at home is to be a “declarer.” Like telling stories about the people who have influenced us most in life, we include God in that list – working through individuals, groups, experiences, reflection times, etc.