

Sermon: Then Came Jesus

New North Church, Hingham

Rev. Steven Aucella

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Based on **Galatians 3:23-29; Luke 8:26-39**

In today's Gospel reading, Luke tells us that Jesus is in the country of the Gerasenes, across the lake 'opposite Galilee,' in Gentile territory. During the crossing, Jesus displayed a command of the *natural* world when he calmed a storm that the disciples feared would swamp their boat. Now Luke gives us an example of Jesus' control over the *spiritual* world. Immediately following this episode, Jesus reveals his power over *death*. So, all within one chapter, Luke shows us that Jesus' power is effective in both Jewish and non-Jewish territory, on land and on sea; and among the living and the dead. The point? Jesus' power is universal.

The historical record tells us that Gerasenes are Gentiles, but Luke's original audience would have known this simply by the presence of swine in the story. So, his visit shows Jesus expanding his ministry to include those beyond his own tribe. This was intentional because Luke tells us that 'a man of the city' met Jesus as he stepped out on land. If Jesus didn't know in advance of a man possessed of demons, then this meeting becomes a happy coincidence.

Matthew, Mark, and Luke all include this story, with varying details. In Matthew, they are in the country of the *Gadarenes*, and there are *two* unnamed demoniacs; in Mark and Luke, there's only one, named Legion. A *legion* can indicate a warlike mob or an invader, but Luke's audience might have heard *legion* as code for the occupying Roman army. A Roman legion in Augustus' time numbered six thousand soldiers, so this story might have a political slant.

Any way you look at it, this man is well and truly possessed.

Luke gives us some clues about the demoniac and his relationship to the city and to Jesus. First, the demon recognizes Jesus as the Son of the Most High God, which makes it important for Jesus to know the demon's name in return, because in the ancient Near East, knowing someone's true name gave you power over them. Think of Moses asking God, 'What shall I say to the people when they ask me your name?' And the Lord, knowing the power that would give him, provides only an alias, saying, "Tell them 'I Am the One Who Makes Things Happen.'"

Second, the man's seizures come and go, so just in case, the city kept him under guard, bound with shackles and chains, but the bonds couldn't have been that strong because he broke free all the time. So, we have to ask, why is that? Why not bind him so tightly that he couldn't escape? Since he didn't seem to be hurting anyone but himself, something else must be going on here that we're not being told.

Third, both the possessed man and the Gerasenes have disturbed each other in equal measure, he with his behavior and they with their chains. This looks like a community trying to maintain a balance between control and chaos, and then Jesus arrives and destroys the balance.

At its core, this is a reconciliation story and a faith story, but it is also a scapegoat story. The dictionary describes a scapegoat as 'a person or group made to bear the blame for others or to suffer in their place.' In a scapegoat story, a community targets a minority group or individual for persecution.

The late René Girard wrote that 'Persecutors always convince themselves that a small number of people, or even a single individual, despite his relative weakness, is extremely harmful to the whole of society.' Girard said this is especially true in periods of social crisis, when people 'feel powerless when confronted by the eclipse of culture.'¹

In other words, we get suspicious of people, usually those outside our own group, and then let our stereotypes confirm our suspicions. People aren't so different, but we make them that way. We saw this in Nazi Germany in the 1930s against Jews; we see it in ongoing persecution against Christians in parts of the Middle East today; and, in today's reading, one person seems to threaten the entire community.

Jesus rejects persecution. His ministry re-establishes broken relationships between people and God, and between people and their communities.

In the Gospels, demons cannot exist in Jesus' presence. But we know that demons in many forms can take hold of a person, even a person who wants to know Jesus, and they're very hard to pull out, as the disciples discover later on in chapter nine. Jesus, though, has real power. His words are transformative. But the freedom he provides makes some people fearful. When he restores the possessed man to his senses, he destroys both the system and the scapegoat, leaving behind a disciple restored to God, once naked of faith and now fully clothed in it, made possible by Jesus' healing power.

Jesus' presence also reveals some truth about what was going on with the possessed man.

Did the Gerasenes want Jesus to leave because his non-violent cure worked when their chains did not, or was it because the Gerasenes did not really want a cure? Jesus might have made a new disciple, but he also removed the object of the city's persecution and thus destabilized the balance. By leaving the man to live among them, and to proclaim what God had done for him, Jesus forces the people to confront their inner hatred and violence, and maybe make a change in themselves.

There's an old joke we tell whenever we overstep a boundary, that 'the devil made me do it.' Nothing's ever *our* fault – it's always the devil, or a demon or a legion of demons, that made us misbehave. Most of the time, we do things without malicious intent, like that time when I might have broken a window when I was a kid, which no one can prove I did it.

But that's not that same as being a persecutor. The truth is that persecutors hate without reason. The Gospels show us that hate and violence come from within, and that they can be defeated. The second part of healing, after you send the demon into the abyss, is reconciliation, which might be the most difficult thing for us to do. This is where Luke leaves us to decide for ourselves: do the Gerasenes realize how wrong they've been and reconcile with the formerly possessed man, or do they now simply find another scapegoat?

With Luke's story of Jesus and Legion in mind, let's re-interpret Galatians:

Now before Jesus came, a man of the city was imprisoned by his demons and was kept under guard and bound with chains and shackles until Jesus revealed his power. Therefore, his chains were his disciplinarian until Christ came. But then came Jesus, and the man was no longer subject to his demons, for in Christ Jesus we are all children of God through faith. (Galatians 3:23-26)

Paul's letter revealed that there is no difference between us when it comes to who we are as God's children. Yet, we are all distinct individuals, as different from one another as we can be. But many distinct Christians come together to make one church. Our differences are valuable in the life of the faith community; they give us strength together. But Jesus reconciles all of us to him, regardless of all the things that make us different from each other.

God's steadfast and ever-present love for us and our love for God in return, and our love for ourselves and for our neighbors, is all that matters.

Amen.

¹ Rene Girard, *The Scapegoat*, trans. Yvonne Freccero, (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1986), 20-21.