

Overwhelmed By Jesus

Mark 5:1-20

Bryn MacPhail / Feb. 5, 2012

The biblical account before us this morning is not your typical gospel account.

You could easily make the case that this is one of the most unusual stories in the entire New Testament.

When dealing with a challenging text such as this one, I like to ask a very basic question: *Why is this text here?*

Why did Mark include such a peculiar narrative in his gospel?

There must be significant value to this story since Matthew and Luke also include it in their gospels.

In order to better understand the value of this story we need to review the story that preceded it.

Last Sunday we looked at the account where Jesus exerts power over nature, calming both the wind and the sea.

Such a display of power “**terrified**” the disciples, leading them to ask one another “**Who is this?**” (4:41).

I think that a huge reason for why our current account is included in the gospels has to do with its ability to answer the question, “**Who is this?**”

I must admit, however, to having some reluctance in dealing with a text where demons play such a prominent role.

Thankfully, I am helped to press forward by the words of the late C.S. Lewis, who writes: “There are two equal and opposite errors into which (we) can fall about the devils. One is to disbelieve their existence. The other is to believe, and to feel an excessive and unhealthy interest in them.”

Seeking to avoid each of these extremes we give attention this morning to Mark’s account, which begins with a most unsettling description of a man “**possessed with demons**” (5:2).

This man, we are told, had made his home “**among the tombs**” (5:3). And Luke’s account tells us that the man “**had not put on any clothing for a long time**” (Lk. 8:27).

Mark also explains that there had been attempts to bind the man, but the man was so strong that he would **“tear apart”** the chains and break the shackles **“in pieces”**—**“no one was strong enough to subdue him”** (5:4).

As unsettling a description as that is, isn't it interesting to read how this demon-possessed, tomb-dwelling, bare naked, strong man, is irresistibly drawn to Jesus?

Mark's describes how **“seeing Jesus from a distance, (the demoniac) ran up and bowed before (Jesus); and crying out with a loud voice, he said, ‘What do I have to do with You, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I implore You by God, do not torment me!’”** (5:7).

The response of the demoniac is in striking contrast to Jesus' own followers. The disciples, who were in close proximity to Jesus, and who had witnessed many of His miracles, were still asking one another, **“Who is this?”**

But here, it's as if the demons instinctively knew that they were dealing with the Son of God.

And, not only did they know they were dealing with the Son of God, but they recognized that Jesus had the power and authority to torment and dispose of them as He pleased.

Jesus answers the demoniac by rebuking the **“unclean spirit”** (5:8) and asking him, **“What is your name?”** (5:9).

The demoniac answers, **“My name is Legion; for we are many”** (5:9).

With this answer, an already unsettling account becomes even more unsettling.

In Jesus’ day the word ‘legion’ was most commonly associated with the Roman legion, a highly organized band of soldiers numbering 6,000 or more.

Yet, even as a formidable legion, these demons trembled with fear in the presence of Jesus.

The demons had an acute understanding of their impending doom, and so they initiate, what looks to us as, a bizarre set of negotiations with Jesus.

The demons beg Jesus to **“not send them out of the country”** (5:10), and they entreat Jesus to send them into a herd of pigs that were feeding nearby.

Strangely enough, Jesus grants their request, and **“coming out (of the man), the unclean spirits entered the pigs; and the herd rushed down the steep bank into the sea, about two thousand of them; and they were drowned in the sea”** (5:13).

This aspect of the account is so bizarre it is distracting—Why did Jesus permit the demons to vent their destructive power on this harmless herd of pigs?

We can only speculate on why Jesus might have done this.

The best suggestion I have come across is the notion that Jesus was providing verifiable evidence that He really did cast out a legion of demons.

Without the verifiable evidence, a modern reader might be tempted to conclude that the Gerasene demoniac was really nothing more than a man with a chemical imbalance.

Without the verifiable evidence that the demons were expelled, one might conclude that Jesus healed the man through some sort of advanced hypnosis.

But with 2,000 pigs literally dead in the water, and with the testimony of a group of angry herdsman, it becomes quite difficult to amend the gospel writers rendering of this incident.

We might be surprised that there is no attention given to the economic reality, still less the humaneness, of the destruction of a such large herd of pigs.

The best explanation I can think of is this: *Rescuing this one human life was more important to Jesus than the lives of 2000 pigs.*

Following the unsettling encounter with the demoniac, and the bizarre negotiations with the 'Legion' of demons, we now come to something quite encouraging in verse 15—we read that the demon-possessed, tomb-dwelling, naked man, is now **“sitting down, clothed, and in his right mind.”**

From all outward appearances, the Gerasene demoniac was as hopeless a man as there ever was.

Possessed by a legion of demons, you would think that he was beyond any hope for a recovery.

But then he met Jesus.

The man met Jesus and his life was forever transformed.

As the account closes we are left with two opposite responses to Jesus' power and authority.

Mark records that those who had witnessed the exorcism of the demons, and the subsequent mass suicide of the pigs, told the story to others and **“(the people) began to entreat (Jesus) to depart from their region”** (5:16, 17).

It appears that the confrontation with the demoniac and the destruction of 2,000 pigs was too much for them.

In Luke's account we are told that the people asked Jesus to leave because **“they were overcome with fear”** (Lk. 8:37).

By contrast, **“the man who had been demon-possessed begged to go with (Jesus)”** (5:18).

But Jesus denies the man's request and instructs him: **“Go home to your people and report to them what great things the Lord has done for you, and how He had mercy on you”** (5:19).

Jesus' demonstration of power and authority provoked two opposite reactions from those who witnessed it.

And, even today, the proclamation of Christ's power and authority is provoking varying responses.

Like the multitude in this account who begged Jesus to leave, there are many today who want nothing to do with the Jesus revealed in the Bible.

But, thankfully, there are others, like the man who was healed, who are eager to follow Jesus wherever He leads.

If you count yourself to be a follower of Jesus, the mandate given to the healed man also applies to you.

We too are commissioned to “**go**” and to “**report**” to others “**what great things the Lord has done for (us), and (to report) how (the Lord) has had mercy on (us).**” (see Matt. 28:19).

Admittedly, it is doubtful that any of us can match the dramatic testimony of the healed demoniac.

What a sermon he would be able to preach!

He could describe to others his life as a demoniac—how he spent his time living among the tombs, cutting himself with stones, he could tell how he used to scare visitors away, and how he would break free from the chains and shackles that were used in attempts to bind him.

And then he could tell them how everything changed the day that he met Jesus: “I once was a demoniac, but now I am a follower of Jesus Christ, the Son of the Most High God.”

Mark records that when the healed demoniac told his story, when he told others about what Jesus had done for him, the people “**marveled**” (5:20).

Friends, if Jesus has healed you, the appropriate response is the same.

Report to others the great things Jesus has done for you.

But more than that, can we find a way to live out our gratitude to Jesus for what He has done for us?

I imagine that there is nothing the healed man wouldn't have done for Jesus.

I imagine the man would have climbed any mountain and crossed any sea for Jesus. I imagine that no mission would have been too daunting for this man.

This is what transformation ought to inspire in each of us.

If Jesus has redeemed you, then your life should look differently than the multitudes.

Followers of Christ should not blend in with the rest of society—we should stand out!

In Matthew's gospel Jesus declares to His followers, **"You are the light of the world...let your light shine in such a way that others see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven"** (Mt. 5:14,16).

Jesus puts His light in us and then we respond by shining that light in this world.

Jesus took a person who was likely the most hopeless man on earth and turned him into a missionary.

Jesus turned a demoniac into a difference maker.

I don't think it is a stretch to suggest that *every follower of Christ is meant to be a difference maker.*

And the good news is that we are equipped to be difference makers!

We've been given access to Christ's power in order to carry out the mission of Christ in this world.

One of the things I'm still trying to figure out, as a newish resident of The Bahamas, is the varied opinion that the unchurched population has about the church population here.

I have heard from some corners the notion that the church's greatest concern is for the church.

I have heard it suggested that the typical Bahamian church seeks to thrive financially—even at the expense of its parishioners.

While I loathe such a reality, I grant that, in some instances, this could be an accurate assessment.

But that's not here. That's not us. Not today.

My prayer is that we will gain a reputation for being *givers*, and not takers.

My prayer is that we will be known more for *servicing others* than we are for issuing imperatives.

My prayer is that we will be known for our displays of *mercy* rather than for our displays of *might*.

My prayer is for us to be a unified collection of transformed persons who seek to thank Christ by helping to transform the community around us.

I've heard some kind things being said about the Kirk and our recent initiatives to help our community.

My response to these kind words has been to suggest that we are just warming up.

This is just the beginning.

As we grow—as our transformation continues—our capacity to help others will increase.

We can do more this year than we did last year.

We can do more this year than we did last year, if we stay in close proximity to Jesus Christ and if we are fueled by His power.

I'm excited about the work before us. Let's keep this going!