

Sermon preached at St. John's Episcopal Church, West Hartford, CT

June 23, 2019

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The Second Sunday After Pentecost, Proper 7, Year C

“Jesus and his disciples arrived at the country of the Gerasenes, which is opposite Galilee.”

We stood there on the hill in Jerash, opposite Galilee, about an hour's drive north of Amman, Jordan. We stood in the country of the Gerasenes and looked at the ruins of this Roman city on a hill. Jerash has a well-preserved oval forum, a hippodrome, two great temples, outdoor amphitheatres, all surrounded by long rows of Corinthian columns - over a thousand of them - and even a water powered saw mill for cutting stone in the first century. Jerash is absolutely stunning even today. We could well imagine the story of the Gerasene demoniac happening in front of us. This tortured man, Luke's Gospel says, lived in the tombs outside Jerash; he was naked and in terrible distress when he came to the city to see Jesus. Before the man even asked for help, Jesus commanded the unclean spirits to leave him and drove those spirits out into a herd of swine who rushed down the hill and drowned. We could see where it may have happened, see the elegant streets where this poor man might have scuttled behind the columns to hide his nakedness, see the steep bank where the pigs would have rushed out of sight.

There is a lot more to this story of the Gerasene demoniac than first appears, a lot more than the healing of a man possessed by the devil. It is a story filled with wisdom and filled with hope for all of us who are beset by a legion of demons, all of us who want to change but can't, who are beset by illness or fear or financial worries and pray our hearts out to God and never seem to hear an answer. Look closely at what happens here. The demoniac makes his way to Jesus and Jesus commands the demons to leave him. But the man doesn't cry, "Alleluia! Free at last!" Instead he shouts to Jesus, "I beg you do not torment me." It seems like he was saying, "Wait a minute, Jesus; actually I sort of like my demons; they have been with me a while; they are a part of me." We get a little confused here because we thought the man wanted to be healed - but the story isn't quite that simple.

Last week's news featured the story of Robert Francis Krebs, an 81-year-old bank robber who was just released from prison after spending 30 years there for his crime. Mr. Krebs tried to live free for a few months but couldn't manage outside the prison walls, so he robbed another bank, quite clumsily, and told police he kind of wanted to get caught so he could go back to prison. Mr. Krebs liked his demons, liked his mates in the prison where he got three meals a day and his laundry done as well.

Another man I'll call Caleb thought he wanted to be healed too. Caleb drank too much. Some called him an alcoholic, but he knew he could control his drinking - until he couldn't, and his boss raised questions and his spouse was fed up. Caleb tried; Lord, how he tried to quit, and he got down on his knees and begged God for help. One thing Caleb had was faith in God; he trusted that God could do what he could not do himself, and he felt God's presence and he started to hope. That night after work, Caleb passed by his bar and imagined the taste of a drink going down - he could handle just one, he thought. And then he heard, he felt God surrounding him again. But like St. Augustine struggling with lust, who prayed, "Lord, make me chaste but not yet," like the Gerasene demoniac, Caleb shouted, "God, I beg you not to torment me," like every alcoholic who wants to stop drinking to excess but doesn't really want to stop drinking, Caleb walked into the bar - just walked in - and when the bartender called his name, he sat down. Caleb kind of liked his demons.

Each of us has "sat down" one way or another. We ask God to help us control our temper or our gossip or our anger. Too often we don't really believe that God can act or will act, and so we just go through the motions. Too often we sit down to the roast beef and pray "bless this food to our use and us to thy loving service," and we aren't really asking God to send us out to serve, we just want to enjoy our dinner. Sometimes we remember the power of God and we fear that God can act or will act and demand something of us that we are not prepared to give, and so we close our ears and say, "God, I beg you not to torment me."

Even after the Gerasene's devils had rushed into the herd of swine, his troubles weren't over, for Jesus asked something else of him. The Gerasene just wanted to put on some clothes and sit at Jesus' feet, but Jesus sent him away, saying, "Return to your home, and declare how much God has done for you."

No wonder the man didn't want to go out and tell people about his miracle. People are afraid of miracles. Look, in Jerash, even when the people saw the crazy man, now clothed and in his right mind, they asked Jesus to leave town because they were seized with great fear. Miracles are hard to handle. We don't really want Jesus messing around in our world and upsetting us.

Sometimes we don't even recognize miracles when they happen. In an old story, a man sits on the roof of his house surrounded by flood waters, crying out, "Rescue me, Lord God; I beg you rescue me." And a rowboat comes by and the man keeps praying, and then he hears something and he thinks it is angel wings flying, but it's only a motorboat. The sound of a helicopter overhead startles him and he falls into the flood and dies. At the pearly gates, he begs God, "why didn't you save me?" and God replies, "Son I sent you two boats and a helicopter." Sometimes we insist that God help us in our way, not in God's way.

Too often we don't see the boats that God sends, and we don't listen. We don't listen because our faith is dim or because we are afraid of what we might hear. And so a man named James whose stress filled life is part of the reason he lies in the cardiac unit despairs, "What's with the heart attack, God? I said my prayers; I went to church," and if James really listens he hears God's reply, "Son, I sent you Beethoven, a bicycle, children's laughter, sunsets and the Atkins diet."

We went to two provocative events this past week. We saw the play at TheatreWorks, called *Actually*, about two freshmen at Princeton. We don't know a lot of college freshmen, so our ears and hearts were quite surprised by their ideas on love and race and sexual behaviors. Then we saw the opening of a photo exhibit at the Wadsworth Athenaeum. *Be Seen: Portrait Photography since Stonewall* was an artistic challenge and a cultural challenge, exploring questions of societal norms of gender and sexuality. The world is changing, and that is okay because the only things that never change are things that are dead. But change is often scary.

The people of Jerash were scared. "When they came to Jesus," the Gospel says, "they found the man from whom the demons had gone ... clothed and in his right mind. And they were afraid (so) they asked Jesus to leave them." Sometimes, I think, Jesus' presence terrifies us in the same way. Jesus scares us by putting us in a world so full of change. Society keeps reinventing itself; what was acceptable seven years ago is no longer acceptable today. For better or worse, that is the world in which we live, and Jesus calls us to live in that world and embrace it, to minister in that world, to speak to the issues of the changing culture. He does not call us to retreat from the world or bury our heads in the sand and reject those changes, but to live in a world that is evolving, and that can be a terrifying thing.

So we have much to learn from the story of the Gerasene demoniac.

First, Jesus will meet us where we are. Jesus knew what the demoniac needed and commanded the unclean spirits to leave even before the man could beg for help.

Second, when we ask, when we pray like the Psalmist, "Be not far away, O Lord; You are my strength, hasten to help me," God will answer, so we have to listen when God speaks. So sit on a rock or sit in church or walk in the woods or do whatever you need to hear that still small voice of God.

Third, remember that God is not a cosmic bellhop. Prayer is not efficacious when God does what we want; prayer is successful when we open ourselves to what God wants, to God's plan, God's will, God's love. So when the family is in anguish over the feud with Uncle George and would do anything to have peace, and all they want is for George to apologize and pay for his mistakes, they can beg God to do just that, but maybe God has something else in mind. Maybe God's peace will come when they forgive George and stop carrying their heavy grudge around.

Finally, remember that Jesus asked the demoniac to go home and declare how much God had done for him, to let his thanksgiving be heard, to declare, I once was lost but now I am found, to tell the good news of God's mighty acts. Gratitude doesn't mean much if it goes unexpressed.

We stood on holy ground indeed there in Jerash, but we don't have to go that far away to let the Gospel story into our souls. For we stand on holy ground right now.