

June 23, 2013. The Gerasene Demoniac. Luke 8: 26-39. Nigel Taber-Hamilton

Some of you will recall me describing Jesus public ministry as a “Lake Ministry” because almost all of it happens around the edge of the Sea of Galilee. The Galilee was a diverse place: on the borders of ancient Israel it had a significant Jewish population – Nazareth is an example – but it also had others from other ethnic and religious groups. So when, today, we hear that Jesus had “arrived at the country of the Gerasenes, which is opposite Galilee” – meaning to the east of the Sea – we should remember that some of his hearers were Jewish, and other not.

Gerasa later became famous as the location of a Jewish revolt brutally put down by the Roman Army in 67 A.D. slaughtering 1,000 rebels and then destroyed it and surrounding villages.

Gerasa was, in other words, a place of significant opposition to Rome. Which brings us to today’s bulletin cover – what’s on it? A Pig. Dressed as a senior Roman officer – the “brush” is back to front; Centurions’ bushes went from side to side. So why dress up a pig as a Roman officer? Because of the demoniac’s name! “Legion” is the Latin name for the Empire’s standard military unit – about brigade-size with up to 6,000 Roman soldiers. ***Luke is linking the exorcism of the evil, supernatural powers occupying the demoniac with acts of Roman oppression, because it was believed that such evil supernatural powers were behind all systems of violent oppression.***

Throw in the pigs (metaphorically speaking, of course) – animals that weren’t “kosher”, were incapable of being pure – and you not only get the bulletin cover, you get a priceless piece of irony! The 3<sup>rd</sup> “Gallic” Legion was based in their area – in the Decapolis. Pretty much every Jew in that audience would have applauded if that Legion ran into the Sea of Galilee and drowned themselves, not the least because it would mean that all Roman presence in their would be gone.....!

In the story, the demons fear Jesus. They have good reason to fear that Jesus will torment them. He most certainly will. They flee because they can’t withstand his authoritative command. And they can’t stand to be in his presence. His goodness is an agony to them. They rush into the sea and drown.

Today we look at the story very differently than Luke’s first readers would have done. We would want to refer the demoniac for immediate treatment for multiple schizophrenia, for instance! **But here possession is a symbol of the oppression of one culture by another. Personal exorcism becomes symbolic of corporate liberation from oppression. As we hear the hooves of the pigs clicking toward the sea, the message is that even the power of Rome will ultimately be no match for the liberating power of God in Christ. This exorcism speaks to Jesus’ power and authority to liberate the world from oppression and chaos.**

This is very important. We tend to see this exorcism as a personal freeing of a nameless man, but it’s so much more than that. It’s about “God’s ability to defeat and re-order the disordered powers that afflict individuals and communities.” (Jeffrey John, “The Meaning in the Miracles”, 91).

The content of the exchange between the demons and Jesus is also highly symbolic – though easy for our 21<sup>st</sup> Century minds to miss. In the 1<sup>st</sup> Century names had power. **Knowing your opponent's name was regarded as a means of establishing dominance.** The demons seek to establish dominance over Jesus by stating his name. Jesus demands their name *and they submit to him.*

Properly understood, that exchange is meaningful for us. We might well ask ourselves, "Can we accurately name the demons in our own lives and in our community?" For us those demons can be both personal and communal struggles, either with temptations to allow our domination by unjust and destructive attitudes and practices or to exercise domination over others. We're all aware on some level that sometimes, we're used by other individuals and groups/institutions for their own good, and sometimes we use others.

So here's a significant question for us as people of faith and as Christians: Do our 'demons' recognize the authority of Jesus to evict and eventually destroy them? Do we believe that he has that authority to evict and eventually destroy our demons?

This story also invites us to look in the mirror. Each one of us could say with some accuracy, "My name is Legion, for we are many." At some time or another we have been inflicted or have inflicted others with the exercise of power in ways that destabilize us or them.

And, frankly, it's not hard to find people who're tormented by anxiety, addiction, unjust suffering, or are the butt for others' manipulation or exploitation – they're everywhere.

So here's another important question for us. Can We-Who-Are-The-Church imitate Jesus in searching them out and offering healing? If not, then perhaps, as Jeffrey John has wondered, are we-the-Church still keeping out just the kind of people Jesus wants in?

Those can be scary questions to ask and answer. The townspeople of Gerasa reacted with a similar fear to the healing of one of their own. Recognizing the presence of the supernatural in Jesus, they begged him to leave. The former demoniac, though, wanted to stay by his side. Jesus instructs him to go back home and tell people, not about what an impressive exorcist Jesus was, but about what God had done for him. It's never about us, it's always about the power of God to heal and to save and how we can be vehicles for that power.

One final thought comes out of this remarkable story. In the social reality of the 1<sup>st</sup> Century, Jesus healed the most untouchable of the untouchables. Then he made him the first apostle to the people of this region. In this action Jesus conveys God's embrace of those who have never asked for him. The least acceptable turns out to be the most accepting of what Christ has to offer. He becomes the messenger of liberation to others.

Can we do the same? Have our demons fled at the command of Christ or are they still in residence? What hinders us from telling others the good news that the power of God working through Jesus can defeat and reorder the destructive chaos in our lives and those of others?

Good questions for us to ask ourselves - as scary as the answers might be.

And the people said, "Amen".