

PAUL'S ANONYMOUS PREDECESSOR

Sermon, June 19, 2022

Father's Day

Text: Luke 8:26-39

Long before the Pharisee Saul had the transforming vision of Jesus on the Damascus Road that made him the apostle Paul, missionary to the Gentiles, Jesus had sent another missionary to proclaim the good news to the Gentiles. We don't know his name, however; he remains somewhat anonymous. We read of him moments ago.

Our Gospel reading begins with Jesus and His disciples sailing across the Sea of Galilee to the region of the Gerasenes, which was on the non-Jewish Gentile side of the sea (*one reason we know it was a non-Jewish area is that there was obviously a huge herd of pigs there; kosher laws forbid pork products for Jews*). We are told the first person who "greeted" them was this man who had been driven crazy by his demons. Luke tells us that "... for a long time this man had not worn clothes or lived in a house, but lived in the tombs." So, this wild man is running around naked and living in the cemetery. Mark's account of this story tells us that day and night this man would cry out in his loneliness, and repeatedly cut himself with stones, engaging in the self-mutilation of his body. He is strong enough to break out of any chains and shackles. Yet, please note, he is *not* a monster. He is a human being ... a human being in need of sanity and salvation (*or salvaging, which is part and parcel of what salvation is all about!*). Where others just saw a crazy, scary person plagued by his demons, Jesus saw the man; He saw a human being made in the image of God, one who could be rescued, changed and restored to sanity.

You have to know this man had a history before he was tormented by his demons. Certainly he was somebody's son; when he was born, surely his parents had hoped for a different kind of future for him. Maybe he was somebody's husband, somebody's father, somebody's brother. Whoever he was, he was a man driven out of his mind and away from the security of a home by the demons which plagued him.

Some of you here this morning may know and love people just like this man.

I know that with modern science and psychology the whole concept of demons sounds so pre-modern, so Stephen King. Whenever we come across a Bible text that talks about demons, it's tempting to skip that part and just keep reading. But, as I've mentioned before, if we were to cut out all the Bible passages that referred to demons, we would end up with a real "holey" Bible ... demonic activity is frequently mentioned in these pages. It's a delicate subject, one I really am not equipped to address fully, other than to say we may call the demonic by more sophisticated names today, but can any of us deny there is still an evil at work in some people that can only be described as demonic? If so, then we are just not paying attention. Mass shootings in our schools and in the streets of our major cities; the brazen out of control looting and random assaults reported almost daily in the news; the 574 destructive riots that took place between May and July 2020 injuring more than 2,000 police officers and who knows how many civilians who were beaten, maimed, killed and/or lost businesses and homes; the atrocities of war in Ukraine and elsewhere; and I could go on ... there is something more insidious behind all this than just human depravity. And I am also convinced demons have more to do than we think with common and seemingly innocuous things excessively indulged in, and/or poisonous attitudes and grudges that are nursed and fed and allowed to grow and fester until we find ourselves as miserable loners shunning and being shunned by others, and so-called "little sins" and nasty habits that, allowed to run unchecked, can work to take over, consume, even possess our very being and cripple our lives.

Sometimes in this text you just don't know who is speaking, this crazed man or his demons. Those of you who know and love those who are so tormented know something of what that's like ... when vile things come out of their mouths, you instinctively recoil and think, "*That just can't be my spouse, my child, my friend, my neighbor talking.*" When Jesus asked the man's name, it was apparently the demons within who replied, "*Legion! (and Mark's account elaborates, "We are Legion, for we are many." I guess his preferred pronoun was "They.")*" And "they" answered LOUDLY; when we meet this man he is shouting at the top of his lungs! It almost seems as if this legion of demons is trying to drown out or shout down any competing voices, loving and redeeming and calming voices that would speak words of reason or sanity or salvation to this man, voices who would tell him who he really is in the sight of God.

Maybe there are some of us here who may be able to relate to this man. In our culture we are bombarded by so many different and LOUD and passionate and conflicting voices clamoring for attention, trying to drown out saner voices of reason and calm and common sense, trying to tell us who we "really" are, or who we should be, or how we should feel, or what we should do. There are the voices that try and intimidate you, "*Who do you think YOU are?*" And then there are the voices constantly echoing, "*You are not good enough. You are not smart enough. You are not pretty enough. You are not male/female enough. You are not (fill in the blank) enough!*" Some of us just keep hearing all those evil, vile, loud, conflicting voices to the point where we don't know who we are and we've been *deafened* to the gentle and calming voice of God's spirit, the voice of the God Who created us and loves us and Who wants nothing

but GOOD for us. Trust me on this, demonic voices always try to drown out the loving voice of God Who only wants to graciously restore us to serenity and wholeness and simple sanity and life.

I think it's interesting to note that as soon as the demons see Jesus, they recognize Him. *"Jesus, Son of the Most High God!"* they cause the man to cry out. In fact, I've always find it interesting in the Gospels that demons seem to be the only ones who consistently recognize Jesus for Who He is. Even the disciples never quite get it right until after the Resurrection (*in fact, in the very verse just before this story begins, we see the disciples asking themselves in fear and amazement, "Who IS this? He commands even the winds and the water and they obey him."*) But as soon as the demons see Jesus, they know who He is ... they then take this troubled man, throw him down at Jesus feet, and through him begin begging Jesus not to send them away into the abyss, pleading with Jesus to send them over to the large herd of pigs nearby (*numbering two thousand pigs, according to Mark*). Just as an aside, and this is almost another sermon, but I want to note that this is one of the most hopeful images of the Bible ... we have evil down on its knees begging before Jesus! Do we understand the power of this? More to the point, have we *encountered* the power of this, by allowing Jesus to confront the evil lurking in our lives?

When the demons took possession of the pigs instead of the man, well, the pigs were not about to tolerate and/or live with this kind of evil. So they rushed down into the water in an attempt to get rid of the evil and wound up drowning. When the swineherds tending the pigs saw what happened, they ran back to town and told everyone about it, and all the people came out. As soon as they find Jesus, they ask Him to leave! They ask Him if He wouldn't mind getting back in His boat and never come back. Why is that? Is it because they are angry? After all, they could be angry because Jesus did send a good part of their local economy over the cliff, and now who's going to pay for all this deviled ham floating in the lake? (*When we looked at this passage in 2009, it was shortly after the swine flu epidemic of that year ... in the greeting line after worship our late friend Jim Ruegg commented this was the original case of the Swine Flew ... the swine flew themselves off the cliff*). But the text does not tell us the people were angry; it tells us they were terrified! They were frightened when they saw the demoniac now sitting down, fully clothed, gentle, restored, in his right mind, talking to Jesus! They were afraid, because this man had been made well! No one ran up to this man and said, *"Oh, man, I'm so glad you are better! Welcome back! We missed you while you were crazy, come on home, your family is waiting for you ..."* No, they're afraid ... they're afraid of what Jesus has done. Why?

There may be many reasons, the most basic of which is that dealing with the truly demonic often creeps people out, but in the time remaining I'd like to suggest one possible reason that is admittedly speculation: Maybe they're afraid because they know if Jesus got rid of the evil in this man, then if He were to stay around, He would also get rid of the evil in their lives. And maybe they have grown used to the way it is. Sometimes it is the case that people really don't want their demons to be gone; many people just want advice on how to *manage* their demons. Some may even want Jesus (*and/or the church*) to *bless* their demons. Their demons may be tormenters, but at least the demons have been there for them, helping them to cope, and maybe they're afraid they wouldn't know how to live without their demons. And this is another "almost another sermon," but I believe there is nothing more demonic than getting used to evil, even calling evil good, and then allowing evil to mold and shape us into its image so much so that we reject and chase away what is truly good and right and sane. So they plead with Jesus to go away. I think the most disturbing part of this passage is when the townspeople asked Jesus to leave, He did! He got back in His boat and sailed away, and as far as we know, they never heard from Jesus again.

Speaking a bit allegorically, I would say that every time Jesus the Savior appears, people are confronted with a great choice. Either you are going to have to let Him stay and change everything about your life, or you're going to have to ask Jesus to go away and leave you alone. Those are really the only two choices we have. Jesus will not force His grace or His saving presence on us. But if you invite Him to stay, it's going to change everything, and it's certainly going to change *you*. You'll have to stop getting used to sin. And you're going to have to listen only to the voice of Jesus to remember who you are, who you should be, and how you should live.

One final observation and thought, and hence the sermon title: Just as Jesus was getting back in the boat, the man he had healed and restored and freed came running up and asked if he could go with Jesus and leave this place of bad memories. But Jesus said "No." *"No. You stay here, and return to your home, and tell everyone there what God has done for you."* Jesus says, *"Go home and tell your story. Tell others what God has done. Tell it to the people you hurt when you went crazy. Tell it to the people who hurt you so much they drove you crazy. Tell them you have learned how to forgive, and how to be forgiven."* And he did so ... thus becoming the first missionary to be sent out by Jesus to the Gentile world to proclaim the great things He has done.

If your life has been touched by Jesus ... if you have discovered being forgiven is better than being evil, if you have discovered that being faithful and sane is better than being faithless and tormented ... then the first place Jesus wants to send you is right back home, back to your family, your friends, your community. After all, the townspeople may too frightened to listen to and/or approach Jesus at first, but they might listen to someone they knew, one of their own people, and they would hear from him of God's goodness and grace revealed in Jesus. Jesus loves that part of the world where you live, and He has called you to be there as a symbol and testimony that change and sanity and serenity and **hope** is possible ... whenever the presence of Jesus is invited to stay.