

Grace and peace to you from God, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

From the moment that the demoniac first confronts Jesus, the whole episode invites us to consider what Jesus has to do with the forces that occupy and control us. How many people in our world are haunted by a traumatic past and tortured by memories? How many live unsheltered and inadequately clothed because of social and economic forces that they cannot overcome, no matter how hard they struggle? How many are imprisoned, regarded as barely human, excluded, cast out? How many are enslaved by addictions no longer knowing where the addiction ends, and their own selves begin? Where do the governing authorities separate people from their families, denying them the opportunity to seek better lives? Where do occupying armies still brutalize entire communities and hold them captive to fear?

Jesus comes to challenge and cast out every power that prevents us from living fully and freely as human beings created in God's image. Jesus claims sovereignty not just over our souls, but over our lives here on earth. Many among us resist that news, finding deliverance from Legion too frightening, too demanding, too costly. But those whom Jesus has healed and freed know that his liberating love is indeed good news, the gospel that he commands us to proclaim throughout our cities and towns. Still today God is at work in Jesus, bringing God's kingdom *on earth*, as it is in heaven.

What if Jesus came to visit you? What would you do? How would you feel? Would you be excited and honored? Would you be anxious and stressed out? Would you be comforted and uplifted by the possibility of a visit from one who seems so loving and kind? Would you be anxious and uneasy, maybe hurrying to do some extra cleaning and straightening of the house? Would you prepare a special meal? Perhaps buy a new outfit? What would you do if Jesus came to visit?

In our text today, Jesus pays a visit to the country of the Gerasenes, a Gentile region across the Sea of Galilee. He comes as he always does in Luke's Gospel with the authority and power of God's inbreaking reign. When Jesus comes to visit, it is no longer business as usual. When Jesus is present, people and conditions are challenged, upset, transformed. His visit to the Gerasenes makes quite an impact. Almost before he can get off the boat, Jesus is met by a man described as demon possessed. The man is buck naked. He appears to be crazy. He comes at Jesus from his home in the cemetery, and he is shouting at Jesus to leave him alone, not to torment him. We learn as the story unfolds that it is not really the man who speaks to Jesus, but the demons who are bargaining with Jesus. In a dramatic scene Jesus sends these demons to their destruction and restores the man to health and wholeness. Here is the transforming power of God at work.

As a teenager I remember Johnny Cash, a great up and coming country music star who had trouble with alcohol, drugs, and ended up in prison. Everyone thought his career was over. But June Carter loved him unconditionally and if you

followed country music you know that Johnny became a changed man. His life was changed by love --by June's love for him, and the love of Christ.

But let's look at what happened in today's story. The reactions to the visit of this powerful Jesus are swift and intense. The demons realize immediately that they are in the presence of a power greater than their own. They represent the forces of evil and oppression that are active in our lives and in the world, and these forces always tremble when they come before the dynamic presence of God's reign. The reaction of the people in the area to the healing of their neighbor is most striking. You might think that they would be happy that this man who has caused them so much trouble is now sane and whole. Perhaps they will throw a party to celebrate this miracle of salvation or hurry to bring to Jesus other friends in need of healing. But there is no party, no celebration. Luke says they are seized with a great fear. They are in a state of panic" They are scared and they ask Jesus to leave their community.

It seems like an odd response to those of us who don't think of Jesus as fearful. Why are they scared? Maybe they're fearful that if Jesus hangs around they won't be able to make a living. After all, Jesus has just sent a big part of the local economy to destruction in the lake. And the unsettling power of Jesus extends to pocketbooks and economic systems. But the fear of these people may be about more than the possibility of no longer having a job. If Jesus has power over the forces of the world that oppress and bind, if Jesus can heal somebody like the longsuffering man in the text, destroying a hog farm in the process, what might he do next? Who is safe from such a power? And what if I don't want to see my life upset but prefer to remain in my comfortable, familiar patterns of living.

There is a story about a farmer who had a few animals he kept in a barn that had gotten old, drafty, and leaky. Concerned for his animals' wellbeing, the farmer decided to build a new barn. He built a fine new barn, tore down the old one, and was comforted to know his animals were now safe and dry. One day a storm came through the area. The farmer decided to look in on his animals, and he was shocked to discover that the barn door had been left unlatched, and all of the animals had left the new barn and were huddled beneath the storm within the foundations of the old, familiar barn. It is easier to hold on to what we know than to face the new. Isn't that what we do when we so fondly reminisce about the "good old days". Life is about changing, growing, looking for opportunities to help others and spread God's love to the world.

When Jesus comes to visit, he comes with a possibility of new beginnings, but that transformation and healing will mean the end of other beginnings, the exorcism of old ways of living. For the Gerasenes, it was too much to risk. They asked Jesus to leave.

This fear of the new is not unknown to us. We see it in churches and individuals that cling to old patterns of living, even when it is clear that those old patterns are not life-giving; and if Jesus comes to visit, we just might ask him to leave like the Gerasenes, afraid of what he might do to our familiar ways.

There is one other reaction to Jesus' visit in our story, and that is of the man who was healed. This powerful Jesus has given him back his life. From a naked, howling, tormented man who lived in the graveyard, he has been changed to one who sits at the feet of Jesus clothed and in his right mind. Astounding! The healed man is so grateful that he pleads to be allowed to go with Jesus back to Galilee, but at Jesus' direction he becomes an apostle to his hometown, bursting with the good news of what Jesus has done for him. If fear is our response to the power of Jesus and to the possibility of new life, I imagine the man saying to us, "I understand your fear, but don't be too quick to send Jesus away. I wouldn't go back to who I was before Jesus came, for anything. Trust Jesus to make the best of your life.

We all have our personal demons. Though God accepts us for who we are and where we are at, God also wants to cast out the demons in our lives and let us grow into God's image. The Christian Life is a life-changing experience—it is a transformation of our being. We may face the demons of depression, fear, inadequacy, self-hatred, pride, addiction, greed, or many others, but God is more powerful than our demons and gives us the victory.

Yes, life contains many challenges. Good and bad. Jesus will see you through. God is greater than anything with which life threatens us. Just remember that Jesus calls us to step out in faith and share the good news with others. Jesus is knocking on your door. How will you answer? Amen.