

Sunday June 22, 2025

Luke 8:26-39
“Facing the Legion”

A local MP was touring a psychiatric hospital that was in his riding. The chief administrator did a fine job of escorting the MP around, and explaining the facilities procedures, treatment options, and the desperate need for government financing to upgrade equipment and facilities. At the end of the tour, the MP thanked his host and said, “There is still just one thing I still don’t understand. How do you, and your staff, determine if someone should be admitted to the facility?”

The administrator replied, “That’s a good question. We administer a little test. With each new potential patient, we take them to a large bathroom where we have filled a bathtub with water. We hand the potential patient a spoon, a cup, and a bucket: and ask them how they would drain the tub of its contents.” The MP replied, “Well that’s easy. I’d use the bucket.” The administrator face turned very pale, and he replied, “The sane answer is that you would pull the plug. Now would you like a room next to a window?”

I used this story, to set the stage for our exploration of this familiar, but rather unusual gospel story. In our modern sensibilities, we read a story about demon possession, and we maybe are inclined to immediately dismiss it as an unscientific and archaic view of what was happening. Today, if we encountered someone like the possessed man in the story, we would assume that he was seriously mentally ill, in need of treatment, and probably incarceration.

The man who ambushes Jesus in our lesson today was a menace to himself, and to the whole area around where he wandered. In his madness, the man lived a horrible existence, living among the tombs, or caves where the dead were buried. Modern neural science would like us to believe that demonic possession had no part in this story. His bizarre behavior could be explained by a serious chemical imbalance in his brain like maybe schizophrenia.

Demons, and demon possession are old wives’ tales used to explain odd and frightening behaviour in a time of limited scientific knowledge. In other words, there is no such thing as the demonic. Yet don’t you find it interesting how much interest there is in popular culture in exploring the subject. Movies, television shows, books, and even some music, all promote or explore demonic themes. One of the longest running series on television was about two brothers who chase down demons. It’s called “Supernatural”.

If such powers do not exist, why as a culture are we so fascinated by it? The early gospel writers were likely not familiar with the concept of mental illness, but one thing is certain, and that is that whenever Jesus encountered people possessed by demons three things were always present. The first was that the demon possessed demonstrated self-destructive behavior. In this case, the man avoided wearing clothes and caused physical harm to himself.

The second symptom apparent is that the victim feels trapped in their condition. They cannot help themselves. Thus, this unnamed man is driven to animalistic behavior and living in places reserved for the dead. And finally, those Jesus encountered who were demon possessed, were separated from family and friends. All social support was unattainable to them.

This poor man who lived among the tombs, terrified anyone who came near him. Not even his own mother could get near him. If confronted by anyone, he would lash out violently. The goal of any demon possession recorded in the bible was the same. To capture us and prevent us from becoming what God intended us to be.

The other critical part of the story is its location. The incident takes place when Jesus arrived in the land of Gerasene, or Gadarenes, depending on your translation. The location of this incident is somewhat problematic for biblical scholars, as the three gospel writers do not seem to agree on where exactly this event happened. Even in the earliest copies of Luke, there is disagreement on where Jesus encountered this demonic possessed man.

The one thing we can be sure of, and what each of the Gospel writers want us to understand, is that this event takes place outside of Israel. This is the land of pagans, or Gentiles. It is on the other side of the Sea of Galilee, and no self-respecting Jew would wander over there. One reason that the gospel writers might disagree on the location, is that maybe none of them had ever been there before, nor likely to go there again. It was truly foreign territory.

There is a critical and beautiful lesson that comes from the location of this story, and that is that Jesus is willing to travel outside of comfort zones to reach lost and desperate people. Jesus is willing to go among strange people, who believed strange things, and worshipped strange gods. I mean, these people ate pigs, something no god-fearing Jew would ever do. The moment Jesus sets foot in this foreign land, everything he touches is unclean.

Jesus walked into an unclean land, with unclean people-where there were hillsides full of unclean animals, and who is the first person he meets there? A naked, filthy, probably physically scarred, out of his mind, man. A man whose only words sound twisted and animalistic. Any sensible person, encountering someone like this man, would run in the opposite direction. It's like here in Simcoe, where we occasionally encounter people who are clearly mentally ill.

Quite often we run into them in public places like on downtown streets. Perhaps they mutter to themselves, although with blue-tooth technology it is sometimes hard to know who is really the mentally ill these days. Sometimes they are dirty, wearing ragged clothes, disrupting the peace we all long to experience. Normally, we want to keep our distance, mostly out of fear. Fear that we may say something that sets the person off on a rage.

If we are uncomfortable with these folks, imagine encountering this man Jesus meets. Michael Rogness makes a great comment when he writes that the man Jesus meets that day is essentially already in a "living death". Unlike the "Walking Dead" or zombies, this man moved quickly, and with mindless ferocity. A living death. Dare I call it hell on earth? Now here is the meat of what I want us to think about today out of this passage.

Is there still demonic activity in our world today, or can we explain it all away with science? Let me rephrase the question. If being under demonic possession is what Michael Rogness calls a "living death"; are there people today who are experiencing this "living death"? I personally believe that demonic or evil forces are still at work, but I also believe that their strategy is becoming increasingly subtler out of necessity.

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I say this because a man like the one Jesus encountered, would today be locked up, and heavily medicated. He or she would still be in a “living death”, but now the destructive goals of that demonic influence would be greatly diminished by lock and key and dopamine. And so, I wonder if the demonic has not changed tactics. Through addiction, obsessions, paranoia, destructive habits, and many other such things.

The states of “living death” that we encounter now are no less destructive, maybe even more so, but they do not fall under criminal activity. I could even argue that the terrible shooting in Minnesota is demonic. But like all demonic activity the same three characteristics still apply. Take an addiction for example: the person causes harm to themselves, they feel trapped in their circumstances, and they end up being separated from family and friends.

Those wrestling with addiction usually find themselves unable to reach their God given potential. I chose addiction as an example, because of the fine work of groups like Alcoholics Anonymous and their related organizations, in helping people find their way back out of the darkness. But it is also interesting that in our modern scientific age, the most effective treatment for addictions begins with the twelve-step program.

The twelve-step program begins with these three steps. 1) We admitted we were powerless over our addiction, that our lives had become unmanageable. 2) We come to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity. 3) We decided to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God, as we understand Him. AA programs recognize our need for God to deliver us from a “living death”.

Did you know that in the former Soviet Union, alcoholism was a serious problem? Before the collapses of communism, Soviet officials appealed to American AA members to help them set up AA groups in the USSR. However, because the Soviet Union is officially atheistic, they asked that these first three steps be omitted in adapting the program to them. The Americans refused, they said that these three steps were crucial to the success of every member in their program.

Members of AA need God’s help, but they also need the support of family and friends. In almost every story of Jesus healing someone from demon possession, the person was immediately restored to the community. The goal of exorcising demons was always restoration. Healing what was fractured, mostly relationships. Being made free from our demons is not a do-it-yourself project. We need God and we need other people; we need community.

No one living in isolation ever escapes a state of “living death” or hell on earth. Being isolated just adds to the torment. That is why AA has meetings, open to anyone, and you can go to as many as you want or need. They also have sponsors, who work tirelessly to help someone just starting out on the road to recovery. Now I know you are asking yourself, what’s the deal with the pigs in this story?

I mean, look at the outrage we heard when wild animals have to be put down, imagine what the SPCA would say about this herd of pigs. The demons knew who Jesus was, and what he was going to do. His presence caused them no end of pain; light does that to darkness.

Instead of banishing them to hell, Jesus allows them to leave the man and head straight to the pigs. Regardless of what we think about the pigs, the scene is a very symbolic one.

Pigs were considered unclean, so what better place for unclean spirits to dwell, than in a herd of pigs. But the dark presence drives the animals immediately insane, and they promptly destroy themselves. The scene ends with the man clothed, and in his right mind, sitting at Jesus' feet worshipping him. It is a great story, a happy ending; but is it really? Normally when Jesus heals someone, we never get to see what happens to the person right after the healing.

And what we learn about the aftermath of this exorcism is not encouraging. When news of the demoniac's healing, and the destruction of the pigs, made its way among the locals, the people begged Jesus to leave. Why would they ask the person who healed a man, no one else could help, be asked to leave? The bible tells us they were afraid. What exactly are they afraid of here?

Maybe they were afraid that these demons now on the loose might try to inhabit someone else. Remember these were pagan folk, and likely people who were very superstitious. This may be why someone didn't just put an arrow into the man years ago. Wouldn't it have been easier to just get rid of such a menace. But again, maybe they fear the demons getting loose and taking vengeance on the community.

Maybe it was a fear based on economics. I mean, who wants to lose another herd of pigs? Isn't it easier to just avoid this man, than lose a great amount of wealth? As a society we make these awful choices all the time, with vulnerable people. It costs a lot of money to keep someone in a psychiatric facility long term, so if they are not a danger to themselves, or others, we let them go to live meager lives on the fringes of society.

Maybe it was as simple as people do not like change. Whatever the reason, they ask Jesus to go, they beg Jesus to leave. Did you notice how much begging is going on in this story? The demons beg that Jesus let them go to the pigs, the people beg Jesus to leave, and the man begs Jesus to let him go with him. In response, Jesus allows the demons to enter the pigs, he agrees to leave, but he does not allow the man to come with him. Odd, isn't it?

These people who encounter Jesus are left in a complete tizzy. The man who is healed is left by Jesus to face an uncertain future, in a town where the people will not know what to do with him. So often in the scriptures, people who meet Jesus have their whole worlds turned upside down. They end up being scared by his awesome life changing power. There is no going back to the way things were before the demons entered the man.

That is what happens when Jesus exorcises the demons from us. He sends us in a direction we had not foreseen. In the book of Hebrews, we read, "It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of a living God". (Heb. 10:31) When you are amid a "living death" from whatever demon has a hold of you, there is no going back when Christ delivers you. Like the man in the story, he will call us in our new state of freedom to share that good news with others.

No wonder some people just don't want to let go of their demons. They know that if Christ delivers them, their lives will be radically altered.

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The truth that is inherently connected to this story is that we can refuse the grace and love Christ offers us. We can, by our own choice, remain in our “living death”. I am not sure our possessed man in today’s passage would be capable of such a refusal, as he was so far gone, but many others can. Many others can and have decided to dwell with their own personal demons, rather than have their lives turned upside down by God’s grace.

Have I ever told the story of the famed healer who appeared suddenly in the lakeside town of Port Dover? He soon acquired quite a following and reputation and people came from all around to be healed. One fine summer day the healer was strolling along the beach and came across a blind man. He immediately laid hands on the man, prayed and immediately the man’s sight was restored. The former blind man jumped up and ran across the beach celebrating.

Then the healer encountered a woman with a severe skin condition. Again, he laid hands on her and again she was healed, leading to great celebration. By now the whole beach was buzzing with excitement. Next the healer came upon a man who was obviously suffering from severe back issues, as he wore a cumbersome brace. The healer was about to lay hands on him when the man stopped him.

The man said, “I appreciate the kindness preacher, but I’ll pass.” “Why?” the healer asked. “Well, I just got my first disability check.”

Do you want deliverance? Are you prepared for the ways such deliverance will change your life? Is there darkness in your life that needs intervention from the light of the world? Then come and kneel before Son of God and be set free.