

Jesus Is Out There

Presented by Pastor Scott Walters on 06/23/19

At Crossroads United Methodist Church

Waunakee, WI

Today's Gospel is one of the strangest moments in the earthly ministry of Jesus. Jesus is out in Gentile territory, far from home. And in this shadowy, strange place, he is encountered by a sad, strange man. This man is said to be possessed by a demon. We would say that he is very ill. He screams. He is naked, deranged, and so sick that he lives out among the tombs.

Jesus is out on the fringes in today's Gospel (Lk 8:26-39), out at the end of the world, a shadowy place "which is opposite Galilee," his home territory. The first person he meets is a tormented man "who had demons." Perhaps we would call him a man afflicted with schizophrenia or some severe personality disorder. He is truly disordered, raving, naked, screaming incoherently at the top of his voice. Here is an image of the worst of mental illnesses. He is so sick that he has been bound in chains to protect both himself and others from his wild ravings. Here is the very image of complete disorder.

And Jesus takes charge, commands the demons to come out and in a strange, wild scene, the demons enter some pigs who rush headlong down a cliff and are drowned in the lake.

And the strange story ends with the man in his "right mind," sitting at the feet of Jesus. And the man is sent back home, restored to health, preaching to any who would hear, how much God had done for him.

It's a story that happens out on the fringes of our polite, ordered, respectable religion. From this strange story I note three observations that I want you to take with you today:

First - Where is Jesus? He wades out into the swirling vortex of raw human need and pain. He does not remain aloof, safe, in an ordered, safe world. He reaches out, touches, and heals. This means that if this day you, or someone you love, is in the hellish situation of confusion and craziness, there is a good chance that Jesus is there too.

Second - What does Jesus do? He reaches out. He does not simply offer a kind word of consolation. He rebukes the demons, casts them out, liberates and frees and restores. Jesus acts.

Third - What does Jesus command? Jesus heals the poor deranged man and then lets the man go home. The man exuberantly volunteers to follow Jesus but Jesus says, "No, you have suffered greatly. Go home and preach to those around you. Tell them how much God has done for you." Sometimes Jesus commands us to venture out, to travel with him to some far place. And sometimes he commands us to undertake an even more difficult assignment - to go home and tell those closest to us what God has done for us.

So here we are in the church. All fixed, stable, and secure. But then we opened the Bible, read the story, were encountered by Jesus and things broke loose, got unstuck, became strange, in order that there might be healing and restoration.

Now as strange as this final turn might seem, I know that there are people here in this congregation who are right now embodying this story. Jesus has touched you, delivered you, healed you, and spoken to you. And that's a great blessing. Yet you didn't just sit back and enjoy the blessing; you also felt commissioned and called to work for and to witness to the one who blessed you.

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.

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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.

One way we get Jesus to leave is by taming him, by turning him into someone who is kind and gentle, one who never gets too upset, and who is not a threat to anyone.

Dorothy Sayers has written this domestication of Jesus. She writes:

The people who hanged Christ...never accused him of being a bore. On the contrary, they thought him too dynamic to be safe. It has been left for later generations to muffle up the shadowing personality and surround him with an atmosphere of tedium. We have very efficiently pared the claws of the lion of Judea, certified him "meek and mild," and recommended him as a fitting household pet for pale curates and pious old ladies.

Such a Jesus leaves us unhealed but protects us from the fearsome power of God.

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! No wonder he might be singing with U2 or Charles Wesley. 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.

You never know when or where Jesus is going to turn up. He just might come to visit me or you with an offer of healing and new life with the power to make it happen. May we be open to what Jesus might do in us. Amen