

Sailing in To the Storm

February 16, 2020 at First Church in Cambridge, Congregational, UCC

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Texts: Mark 1: 1-20

[NOTE: Our gospel reading this morning comes from the fifth chapter of Mark, but the story it tells began back in chapter 4, in Galilee on the shore of the Galilean lake. At the end of a long day of preaching, instead of heading to someone's house for dinner and sleep, Jesus turns to his disciples and says, "Let's go over to the other side of the lake." That is, "Let's go pay a visit to the Roman empire"; because what's on the other side of that lake is the Greek-speaking region known as the Decapolis. On the way, a huge storm blows up, and Jesus, woken out of a deep sleep, orders the wind and the waves to be still. As morning comes, they arrive on the opposite shore from where they started.]

"SAILING INTO THE STORM"

"When he saw Jesus from a distance, he ran and bowed down before him."

The spirit that has taken over the man in our story has finally met its match. Its reign of terror has ended.

It's the gospel of Mark in a nutshell, the story of the final decisive overthrow of the reign of the powers of darkness.

It begins with Jesus just happening along the road where John the Baptist is dunking people in the Jordan, and ends with an empty tomb, death robbed of its prize and emptied of its power.

Our story today is one in a long series of confrontations with the unclean spirits of this world, the forces that hold people captive, brazenly ruling in the place of God. These are the spirits that must be cleansed to make room for God's new reign on earth.

But what are unclean spirits? What are we, living in a postmodern world, to make of a deeply weird story like this?

Twenty years ago, as a new seminarian studying the history of Christianity for the first time, I got really hung up all the demon references in ancient texts. They embarrassed me, frankly—they seemed so quaint and superstitious and fanciful. It was after I read how St. Anthony of the Desert was once attacked and badly beaten by demons that I finally went to my professor and asked her what I was, "supposed to DO with these stories." (Sound like a seminarian?) Dr. Jensen looked me straight in the eye. "Just because we can't see demons," she said, "doesn't mean they aren't real."

I've thought about that ever since.

Maybe talk about demons and spirits is simply a way of saying that there are forces in this world that make us feel small and powerless: forces of cruelty and injustice that feel bigger than we are. We're living in a time when that feels especially true, aren't we? The naked assertion of power over principle... the scapegoating of immigrants, the disenfranchisement of communities of color, the targeting of the poor and vulnerable.

This April, just a few weeks from now, 700,000 low-income Americans will stop receiving the food assistance they depend on. The government has put forward a plan to make people living on disability re-prove their disability every other year—a calculated act of cruelty against the people least equipped to fight back. And those same leaders are making plans to slash Medicaid for as many recipients as they can.

It feels like a world under siege. And I for one feel incredibly helpless.

What will happen to the people whose fragile means of survival will be unraveled by these policies? Will we blame them for their bad choices when they show up on our street corners? Will we call them lazy and say they're just looking for a handout?

If you've spent any time among people living on the margins, as I know many of you have, you might see something familiar in the man in our gospel story—the one with the unclean spirit.

Separated from his community, thrust outside the city, wild, living outdoors, deranged, a danger to himself and others—a spectacle of suffering, one from whom others turn away...

We have neighbors like that in our city. We see them on the street every day—people who scare us with their wild appearance and behavior, who seem to be hearing voices in their heads, who are cut off from others and unable to properly care for themselves.

They are a subset of the homeless community: the ones who are too ill to fully grasp their situation or accept help when it is offered.

But even if someone isn't in that painful predicament, almost anyone who finds themselves homeless knows what it's like to feel cut off from the rest of the human race, as the man of Gerasa has been cut off—dismissed, given up on, left to fend for himself with no means to do so, and to make his bed at night in a place not fit for human habitation.

The truth is that the moment someone loses their home, the minute they cross that line, they lose their human status in the world's eyes. It doesn't matter whether they're drinking or not drinking, hearing voices or not hearing voices, showering daily or rarely or never—the moment their homelessness is detected, people tell me, respect evaporates. The line turns into an uncrossable abyss. The world has no solution for you, and so it turns away.

You don't have to believe in literal demons to recognize that there are malevolent powers at work, that cruelty and injustice have a deadly hold on human society.

And God's answer to all is... Earthquakes and thunder and armies of angels?

Nope. Just a guy in a boat.

“Let’s go across to the other side,” he said to his disciples back in chapter 4. *“And leaving the crowd behind,”* the story goes on, *“they took him with them in the boat, just as he was.”*

Just as he was. No armor. No cavalry. No magic staff. Just his vulnerable, tired body, which falls asleep the moment he gets into the boat. That’s what the Resistance brings with them when they go to confront Washington, or whatever it was they called it back then.

(Hint: It’s about the pigs.)

I bet you’ve been worrying about those pigs, haven’t you? Those poor pigs—what the heck did THEY do?

I don’t know if I can set your mind at rest about the pigs or not but let me just mention a few things about the text that would have been obvious to a first-century Mediterranean listener.

One: pigs don’t live in herds. Herds of pigs aren’t a thing.

Two: The Greek word which is translated “herd” in our version of the text is a Roman military term, **agele**, meaning, “a band of military recruits.”

Three: Likewise, when Jesus “gives the unclean spirits permission,” that is, dismisses them, the word used is **epetreseri**, a Roman military command.

Four, the pigs then charge— Greek word, **ormesen**, into the sea, like troops charging into battle—or like pursuing Egyptian soldiers chasing Israelites into the Red Sea and getting caught in the waves.

Five: The term the unclean spirit uses when Jesus forces him to reveal his name. Legion, as in, Roman legion.

And six: Speaking of Roman legions, it’s probably not irrelevant that the gospel of Mark is thought to have been written shortly after the cataclysmic fall of Jerusalem to the Roman army, when the holy city was under occupation by the Roman Tenth **Legion**, whose emblem was... wait for it... **a wild boar**.

In Jerusalem. Among Jewish people, for whom the pig was considered unclean. Yeah.

So, when the text says that the unclean spirit *“begged him earnestly not to send them out of the country....”*

There’s a big fat subtext in this story, and it’s about Jesus’ real-time confrontation with empire.

So, were any real pigs harmed in the making of this narrative? Or are pigs a metaphor for the powers and principalities that array themselves against the good purposes of God in that and this and every age?

I'm not going to answer that for you. For me, the story is true either way. True because the Roman occupation of Israel was real, and brutal, and incredibly callous. True because Jesus himself came face to face with it in Jerusalem and bested it in a weird and totally unexpected way that landed him, incidentally, outside the city, among the tombs, clothed and in his right mind. Like the man in our story.

This I do believe.

I do believe that Jesus will go anywhere, talk to anyone, take on whatever needs to be taken on, face any danger, to restore us to God, to ourselves, and to each other. *“Go home to your friends and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and what mercy he has shown you.”*

So, to recap: Jesus crosses the stormy sea of Galilee and steps out onto Roman territory, only to encounter a herd of pigs and a man with an unclean spirit named Legion... It's like the land itself is possessed. Or occupied, if you prefer. And whatever is afflicting the man from the tombs, it can't be neatly separated from what is going on in his country, among his people. Things never can be neatly separated. They're never simply personal, with no social or political dimension. We are too organically woven into our time and context.

There's social context around every story of personal struggle, whether trauma, mental illness, anxiety, grief, or whatever it is that may make a particular life start to come undone.

So, I don't feel like I need to know whether the pigs are real or metaphorical. What I know is that the opposition to God which those pigs represent in the story is real and deadly serious.

And yet Jesus calmly got into that boat in Galilee and sailed into the storm.

He “went there,” in modern parlance. And he is still going there: still sailing into the middle of the messes that humans and our evil impulses unleash on creation, then turn our backs on, saying, “This is too much for me. There's nothing I can do.”

Do we dare to turn around and face back the other way?

Can we follow Jesus across the storm and the waves to be with the hurting, the abandoned, the given-up-on?

Can we go there, just as we are, inadequate as that might seem?

It's all Jesus asks of us.

Helpless as we feel, inadequate as we feel, we are God's answer to the powers of cruelty and indifference: the defiant light of love that those powers cannot control or put out.

It's a messy, chaotic business. Every night, and every Friday from 1:00 to 5:00, we open our church home to neighbors who look and sometimes act a lot like the man of Gerasa. Our

spaces fill with the lonely and the confused, the traumatized and the angry, the disconnected and displaced. If you had told me 10 years ago that I would be managing a program like the Friday Café, I would have been utterly terrified.

But by then, you see, I had already gotten into the boat with Jesus. And where he goes, there I go. And where he goes, life mysteriously opens, so much greater and more abundant than we could ever imagine for ourselves.

There is something incredibly powerful, healing, and liberating about reconnecting with people who seem impossibly cut off. It hurts us all when some of us are living lives of loneliness and torment. It's an act of joyous defiance to turn back and welcome those neighbors into community, just as they are, and just as you are. God's broken, beloved people.

A few months ago, a group of teens and adults on a church mission trip came to volunteer at the Friday Café. At the end of their shift, when I asked them to tell me about their experience, they shared something that will probably stay with them for the rest of their lives.

It seems that en route to First Church, while in the subway, they had a scary encounter with a woman who was clearly off her meds, wild and angry and unpredictable. It shook them up, just at the very moment they were getting ready to come serve at a homeless meal. Kind of like a storm blowing up on the sea as you're making for the Decapolis, you know?

But they got there. They had Jesus with them, after all, and they got there.

And you know who showed up at the Café? That same woman who had scared them out their wits in the subway. She was there!

"We got to see another side of her," they told me. She was laughing and socializing, clearly a member of the community, and someone we knew.

"They came to Jesus and saw the demoniac sitting there, clothed and in his right mind..."

In that Friday Café space, in the warmth of the welcome we've worked at creating together, they were able to see the person herself, not just her demons.

What better answer can we make to the powers and principalities of this world than to turn and look at each other, to recognize each other's humanness, and offer each other the deep and boundless hospitality of God? No angel armies, no magic solutions, no superhuman powers—no, just ourselves. Just as we are. Just as God made us.

And then, with the deep knowledge that we are all in this boat together, and that we all belong to each other, we can go forth and build a more hospitable world for all.

For now, I leave you with this question: *"What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God?"*

Be not afraid, says the angel at the tomb.

Be not afraid, says Jesus from the midst of the storm.

He is with us. He will be with us. It is enough.



