



FIRST
PRESBYTERIAN
CHURCH
SPARTANBURG

SITTING THERE IN [YOUR] RIGHT MIND

Mark 5:1-20

August 23, 2020

Dr. Thomas E. Evans

The Boston Massacre, Pearl Harbor, the Twin Towers. This list immediately brings to mind charged events that stir our emotions, elevate our anxiety, and rally our collective patriotism. Instances of grave injustice.

Upon reading our events this morning, the same trigger would have occurred for Mark's Jewish audience. Gerasa, where our events take place was a site of Roman oppression.

Far from being a story about exorcism, even though there is an exorcism in it, it is a meticulously crafted polemic against Rome and the complex problems that arise within an occupied population. Though at first this may seem a stretch, by the end the sheer weight of the evidence sways us. Unlike other exorcisms, this story contains extensive specifics and is second only to the crucifixion in the sheer amount of detail.

The flavor of this passage is far more gentile than the rest of Mark. The setting of the tombs and the pigs were unclean, associated with rejecting God for a pagan life (Isaiah 65:4). Even the demons name for Jesus, "Son of the most high God," points not to a supernatural enemy but a Roman one, specifically a military Rome.

The horror Gerasa called to mind was recounted by the ancient Jewish historian Josephus:

[Vespasian] slew a thousand of those young men, who had not prevented him by flying away. But he took their families captive; and permitted his soldiers to plunder them of their effects. After which he set fire to their houses, and went away to the adjoining villages. While the men of power fled away, and the weaker part were destroyed; and what was left went up in flames.

(Josephus War, IV.9.1)

The key piece of evidence that this is all a subtext about Rome is the name of the demon – *Legion*. According to scholar Ched Myers, this word is a Latinism that had only one meaning in the ancient world - a troupe of Roman soldiers numbering about 6,000. It would be like naming the demon "Nero" or "Julius Caesar". The name leaves no doubt what it is about.

Because of the clarity this name gives, it is here the story turns. Suddenly, the fact that no one can control him and the reference to pigs makes more sense. For decades Rome's iron grip had frustrated Israel. The pigs represent the Jews' feelings for the Roman swine whose actions were brutal. But the swine in our story don't behave like actual pigs, but Roman soldiers.

Unlike the ones in our story, real pigs don't travel in herds and the Greek word used here also referred to a military company or a band of recruits. When Mark tells us Jesus "gave them permission," one scholar notes the phrasing connotes a military command and the pigs rushing into the sea is similar phrasing to troops entering into battle.

At this point, Mark's audience is meant to make an unmistakable connection. In what part of Jewish history did God use water to destroy a foreign enemy, in which there were also foreign troops rushing into water as into battle? The Exodus of course and the Red Sea.

And, it is this association that leads Mark's readers to discover the next piece of the Jesus puzzle. Just as God liberates his people from foreign enemies, so does the Jesus.

This enables us to make better sense of some troubling details of this story.

Remember, after Jesus liberates the man from the demon, the townspeople beg Jesus to leave. Unlike in his other places of liberation, rather than people praising him in awe, they beg him to leave in fear. Rome's scorched earth reprisals explains this action. The attack upon Geras that Josephus recounted was a repression of a Jewish revolt. Rome dealt swiftly and brutally with any uprisings and, though the people hated Rome, they knew to fear their revenge. They beg the liberator Jesus to leave because they fear Rome.

Secondly, we are told the man possessed, "was always howling and bruising himself with stones." Under occupation, because of the deep and profound stress, people act out in many ways and often they are self-destructive. In fact, various mental illnesses that manifest as demon possession are regularly noted throughout history in occupied lands.

As Ched Myers explains, "the demoniac represents public symbolic action, and collective anxiety over Roman imperialism...colonization of the mind." This colonization of the mind can lead individuals into self-destructive behavior. And Ched Myers goes on to explain, "the tension between his hatred for his oppressors and the necessity to suppress this hatred to avoid dire recrimination drove him mad."

This leads us to this passage relevance for us today. We are occupied, so to speak, not by military might but by a virus. And it has led to a form of madness and self-harm.

A few weeks ago in San Jose California, a woman waiting in line at a Yogurtland felt like the woman behind her was too close. So, she turned around, pulled down her mask, and coughed three times on her toddler. Last week in New Jersey, an elderly woman with a cane was entering the store and asked another woman to wear her mask appropriately. That woman grabbed her, threw her to the ground, breaking her leg. There are countless, awful stories like this.

For Geras the enemy was Rome, but the people were begging Jesus to leave. For us the enemy is the virus, but the months of occupation have led us to the madness of coughing on babies and throwing elderly women to the ground.

Clearly these examples are extreme, but it feels like at least a form of them are pervasive. We are turning on each other, judging each other, dividing ourselves from one another based on our opinions of how to deal with this crisis. But as a country, as a town, and as a church we must be united! We must remember that the person that is voting and thinking differently from you is not the enemy.

We must love one another more than we fear the virus. And give each other some modest room to act out because the pressure is getting to us all.

And more than anything, we need to turn to our Lord. He found a way. He found a way to liberate the man and not endanger the town by sending the demons into the pigs.

We need to look to his example of finding a way to live within this occupation by COVID. And your staff and your Session are working hard to find ways to come together, even while maintaining all the necessary precautions. We are hoping by October to have some opportunities to come indoors safely for fellowship, education, and worship.

I am with you for only a few weeks more. And I want to ask something of you in my departure. Be patient with the Session and staff. They are under a lot of pressure both to do something and to keep everyone safe. No one, *no one* knows exactly where to draw the line and they are trying to do their very best.

Next, since the pressure is getting to all of us, extend an extra measure of grace to others and yourself. As Scripture says, "we are sheep", in fact we are all "sheep that have gone astray" (Isaiah 53:6). In one way or another, each one of us has

gone astray in this time of COVID, harming ourselves or others. So even though we are sheep that have gone astray, remember that Mark tells us that Jesus had compassion upon us because we are like sheep without a shepherd.

Finally, and most importantly, turn to Christ. The text tells us, “no one was strong enough to subdue him.” Think about the plight of this man and the town. The terror lived and all they could do was chain him. None of us are strong enough to do this alone. When you feel like the chains of social isolation and restrictions are making you bust, when you feel yourself being driven mad by the changing protocols, school schedules, call to him, cry out to him, “Lord heal me.” Call out to him with everything you have.

And you just might be surprised that, like the man in our story, suddenly you will find yourself back to normal, “sitting there in [your] right mind” at peace once again.

Amen.