

“How Much Jesus Has Done”

The man from whom the demons had gone...went away, proclaiming throughout the whole city how much Jesus had done for him (Luke 8:38-39).

In today’s Gospel reading, Jesus is engaged in a battle for one man’s soul. In verse 26, we are told that Jesus and His disciples “sailed to the country of the Gerasenes, which is opposite from Galilee.” This simple statement of setting may seem insignificant, and yet it does much more than simply tell us where the boat had landed. Luke’s words reveal that Jesus had left the region of the Jews and was now across the Sea of Galilee in gentile territory and, the instant He steps onto shore, this change in location is amplified by the greeting He received from a local man who, as we are simply told, had demons.

The language used by Luke to describe this meeting on the beach matters. In our English text, we are told that Jesus “was met” by the demon-possessed man, but the original Greek verb used in verse 27 is actually a word with military connotations. It is a verb of conflict that gives the sense of a battlefield attack and that is exactly the way we should understand this encounter on the shore.

As Luke sets the stage for the story, we are presented with a tragic tale of a man who had once lived in the local community, but had now become a pariah, completely cut off from others. The man with demons was an outcast among his own people and Luke underscores this heartbreaking picture by telling us that, “For a long time he had worn no clothes, and...had not lived in a house but among the tombs” (Luke 8:27). This is a description of loneliness and utter isolation, and it is a picture that connects to our Old Testament reading from Isaiah where God describes, “a people who provoke me to my face continually, sacrificing in gardens and making offerings on bricks; who sit in tombs, and spend the night in secret places” (Isaiah 65:3-4). Like the idolatrous people of Isaiah’s day, this is a man who had completely rejected anything godly and had become a menace to everyone around him.

After an exhausting trip across the Sea of Galilee in which Jesus had actually calmed a storm and rebuked His own faithless disciples, this is the welcome He received and yet Jesus doesn’t blink. Without a hint of hesitation, Jesus engaged the evil in front of Him and when the demon-possessed man saw Jesus, Luke tells us that, “he cried out and fell down before him and said with a loud voice, ‘What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I beg you, do not torment me’” (Luke 8:28). There was no uncertainty in these words, the demons who possessed this man knew exactly who Jesus was and unlike the doubting disciples, the demon-possessed man identified Jesus as the, “Son of the Most High God.”

The action that happens next is extraordinary as Jesus begins to deal with the demons, ultimately sending the “legion” of evil spirits into a nearby herd pigs, and promptly causing the unclean animals to rush down the bank into the water where they are destroyed. This action not only rid the man of the tormenting spirits, but it also created quite a commotion in the community as the men who had been herding the pigs saw their livelihood lost in the lake. Concerned less about the outcast who had been released from demon-possession, these herdsman ran off and reported the details of the story to the people of the city and when the people went out to see what had happened, Luke tell us that, “they came to Jesus and found the man from whom the demons had gone, sitting at the feet of Jesus, clothed and in his right mind, and they were afraid. And those who had seen it told them how the demon-possessed man had been healed. Then all the people of the surrounding country of the Gerasenes asked him to depart from them, for they were seized with great fear. So he got into the boat and returned” (Luke 8:35-37).

We really don't know how long Jesus stayed in this pagan land, Luke doesn't tell us, but we know the visit was brief. Jesus leaves as quickly as He came, and yet, in His short stay, everything had changed for the man who had been possessed. Jesus and His disciples had made the difficult trip from across the sea and, as it turns out, *the entire trip had been made for this one lost and lonely man!*

Emmanuel is a downtown church, and over the last ten years, it has become cool to be downtown. Yet, for all of the new bars and restaurants, sheik apartments and inviting parks, we still see a lot of people in need. Some of these people struggle with addiction, some deal with mental illness, and others are simply alone in the world with nowhere else to turn. The truth is, in many ways, the people who come to our church looking for help bear a striking resemblance to the man from today's Gospel reading.

This week, as I thought about this text from Luke, I was forced to confront my own reaction to these needy neighbors and it was quite convicting. In the course of everyday life, when I see an outsider or meet a marginalized person my response to these random meetings is usually one of great caution. At times I avert my glance, careful not to make eye contact, other times I've even crossed to the other side of the street to avoid an uncomfortable conversation.

Think about that. I cross to the other side of the street...but Jesus goes across the Sea of Galilee and *He does it for this one man!* This account is included in three of the four Gospels, it is a pivotal story in Jesus' ministry. It is certainly an example of how, in Christ, we should view outcasts and aliens but, even more importantly, in this story of the demon-possessed pariah, we should see ourselves! The fact is that we are all plagued by the presence of evil. For some of us, it shows up in grief, for some it is seen in anger or in greed or in the need to control others. It changes for each one of us, but all of us experience the evil of this broken world and every one of us struggles with a nature that is far from God. Like the man in our story, every one of us is naturally terrified of God, opposed to His presence, and – by nature – every one of us resists His word. We are as Isaiah writes in today's Old Testament reading, “a rebellious people, who walk in a way that is not good” (Isaiah 65:2).

But God has refused to leave us in our self-imposed isolation, and just like we heard in this reading from Isaiah, He has revealed Himself to those who did not ask for Him and He has found those who did not seek Him. In sending Jesus Christ, the Son of the Most High, God has crossed time and space and He has confronted our sin and rejection with an authority that even the demons acknowledge, and just as Luke described in today's reading, on the cross Christ did battle with the evil that would destroy us; He took on our rejection, He assumed our sins; and today He stands in the center of the chaos of our lives as our risen and glorified Lord and God and His presence changes everything! Where Christ is, there is forgiveness. Where Christ is, there is peace. Where Christ is, there is community, there is hope, there is life, and where Christ is, evil is cast out.

After Jesus drove the demons out of the man, He told him, “Return home and tell how much God has done for you.” Christ crossed the lake to restore this man, not only so that the man would be “dressed and in his right mind” but so that this once ostracized and isolated outcast could go home, could be reunited with his family, could rejoin his community and could carry with him a message of “how much God has done” for him.

Dear friends, please know that the same God who raised the dead; and the same God who healed the sick; and the same God who drove out demons on the shore of the Sea of Galilee is here for us today. Through His Word, Christ is present to restore us, to forgive us, to bring us peace, to show the way of hope and to give us eternal life. And today, He has done it. Go with this healing promise of the Lord, knowing that, in His power, you can go in peace *and cross the street and* tell how much God has done for you. In the name of Jesus, Amen.

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