

“When Pigs Don’t Fly...or Swim”

Scripture: Luke 8:26-39

William C. Pender

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Our Scripture reading this morning is of the continuation of a journey of Jesus in his ministry in the area of Galilee. Jesus and his disciples have been in Israel proper...the Holy Land...the Promised Land. However, now Jesus crosses the border by boat to come to a foreign shore. Listen now as we pick up the story with the arrival of Jesus by boat at to a Gentile area.

Luke 8:26-39: ²⁶ Then they arrived at the country of the Gerasenes, which is opposite Galilee. ²⁷ As he stepped out on land, a man of the city who had demons met him. For a long time he had worn no clothes, and he did not live in a house but in the tombs. ²⁸ When he saw Jesus, he fell down before him and shouted at the top of his voice, “What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I beg you, do not torment me”— ²⁹ for Jesus had commanded the unclean spirit to come out of the man. (For many times it had seized him; he was kept under guard and bound with chains and shackles, but he would break the bonds and be driven by the demon into the wilds.) ³⁰ Jesus then asked him, “What is your name?” He said, “Legion”; for many demons had entered him. ³¹ They begged him not to order them to go back into the abyss.

³² Now there on the hillside a large herd of swine was feeding; and the demons begged Jesus to let them enter these. So he gave them permission. ³³ Then the demons came out of the man and entered the swine, and the herd rushed down the steep bank into the lake and was drowned. ³⁴ When the swineherds saw what had happened, they ran off and told it in the city and in the country. ³⁵ Then people came out to see what had happened, and when they came to Jesus, they 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. ³⁶ Those who had seen it told them how the one who had been possessed by demons had been healed. ³⁷ Then all the people of the surrounding country of the Gerasenes asked Jesus to leave them; for they were seized with great fear. So he got into the boat and returned. ³⁸ The man from whom the demons had gone begged that he might be with him; but Jesus sent him away, saying, ³⁹ “Return to your home, and declare how much God has done for you.” So he went away, proclaiming throughout the city how much Jesus had done for him.

There are at least three questions I am *not* going to answer about this text this morning. First, what would the SPCA (the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals) say about this text? Those poor pigs drowning in the Sea of Galilee! How could Jesus do such a thing? No answer today. Second, what about the destruction of private property here? Someone lost a lot of pigs... tangible assets. How could Jesus do such a thing? No answer today. And, third, do we share the same worldview of those of the first century which saw demons at every turn? In other words, when was the last time we did an exorcism of a demon around here? No answer today.

Welcome to the strange world of the Bible! It would be fun to dabble into these questions, in part because we are curious...and in part because it would allow to us to avoid the clear message of the text. As Mark Twain once said, “It ain't those parts of the Bible that I can't understand that bother

me, it is the parts that I do understand.” And this story has an unmistakable, clear question for you and me.

So consider what we can understand. This little account is the story of Jesus in miniature. Check out the flow of the story:

First, the account begins with Jesus leaving his home country and crossing over to a foreign place. When Jesus crosses the Sea of Galilee and lands near this place called Geresá, he has left his home, the Holy Land, the Promised Land. Compare that to the account we hear at Christmas. Every Christmas, we talk about how God in Jesus crosses over the border and comes into our lives. The Gospel of John speaks of the divine Word crossing over to become flesh and dwell among us. The apostle Paul speaks of Jesus setting aside of the form of God in order to be human like us.

Jesus crosses over...here in this account this morning, Jesus leaves home and crosses over to a foreign shore. And the very first thing that Jesus experiences is conflict. Conflict...right from the “get-go” the child Jesus faced opposition. The governing power of the day, King Herod, sought to kill the child. And the opposition would continue into adulthood for Jesus. In this account for today, Jesus is confronted by a man from the city of Geresá. Here is a person who is completely outside of himself. He does not wear clothes; he has fits of temper that cannot be controlled; he is unfit for human society and companionship. And we have two clues about what demonizes him: the place he lives and his name, “Legion.”

Where does this man live? Even though he is identified as “man of the city,” we find out he lives among the tombs. He can’t leave the place of the dead...or, at least, he keeps going back there. One of the greatest demons I have seen in my own life and others is when we get stuck in the places of the dead. Oh, no, we may keep to our home address but we never stop going back to the “dead places.” That’s what so difficult about grief: we keep going back to the dead places, looking for the living. And sometimes we get trapped into going back and going back and going back. And remember what the angel said at the tomb of Jesus on that first Easter: Why do you seek the living among the dead? So, one clue as to what’s going on with this man is where he lives. He is trying to live among the dead.

And then there is second clue, the name, “Legion.” “Legion” is a clear indication of how to understand this text. In the original Greek of this story, the word “legion” is similar to the English word “legion:” it is a Latin-loaned word. It is a word from the dominant culture of the day: the Roman Empire. “Legion” is a military term for a unit in the Roman Army: one legion would have four to six thousand soldiers.

What is this demon? Legion...the external, dominating forces in this man’s life. Legion is the demonic forces that shape this man’s life. In Jesus’ day, the Roman Empire was not known for its generosity, kindness, and fairness. No, the Empire was known for toughness...its dictatorial control...its dominance. And those pigs...no faithful Jew would have pigs...those pigs are a sign that Rome dominates. The diet for the faithful has been changed and there is nothing to be done.

Think of all the dominating forces in your life and mine. On the national scene: A minority of Americans today believes we should have ever gone into Iraq, no matter our political persuasion.

And only a minority believes we should just pack up and go home tomorrow. In other words, the majority opinion is we shouldn't have gone...but we can't just leave. We are stuck. Consider the air we breathe: Which one of us has any control over the ozone, which affects the air quality of every one of us? We have no choice over the very air we breathe. We are stuck. Consider our news sources. Tell me which news source does not use sex as an attention-getter. If you did not want to know anything about Paris Hilton or Anna Nicole Smith, where could you have turned? We are stuck. And that's not naming all the other stuck places in our lives: jobs, health, families, relationships...the stuck places are "legion."

So, in our Scripture, here is a man, potentially like everyone else who lived in Geresá (and perhaps like anyone else in your household including yourself). Here is a person dominated by an internal force of returning to the dead place, seeking life among the dead...and dominated by external forces that are legion in number. Jesus releases the man...saves the man...delivers the man, but there is a cost. The pigs dash off into the sea...but that is a minor part of the cost. The community gathers to experience the healing. And what do they experience? Fear! The people of Geresá can not handle the healing.

In some ways it is like the 1968 movie, *Charly*, based on the book "Flowers for Algernon." The actor Cliff Robertson won an Academy Award for his portrayal of man with an IQ of 69 (normal is 90 to 110). The character's name was "Charly"...and everyone loved Charly. He could be made fun of, laughed at, belittled—after all, he was a moron. And Charly did not know any better than to enjoy this bad attention...better than no attention. Then through a medical experiment, Charly's IQ begins to increase. And no longer does he do and say things that are considered clownish or stupid or ignorant. Oh, no, he begins to make sense...he begins to be able to work complicated tasks...he learns a new vocabulary.

One day his friends offer him the chance to run the machinery at the bakery where he works as the janitor. His friends expect to get a kick out of watching Charly stumble around. Think of all the physical comedy that entertains us from the Three Stooges to the world's funniest videos—there all about people stumbling in trying to do something ordinary. Second, Charly will likely cause something to go wrong with the equipment and that the workers will get to take the afternoon off. So, they show Charly the steps on how to operate the machinery. And they stand around ready to laugh and ready to get off work—a double bonus. Then Charly slowly...methodically...with great concentration... repeats all the steps in order to run the machinery.

And what of his friends? Do they celebrate? Do they brag over him? Do they say, "Way go, Charly!?" No, they are afraid...afraid of whom he has become...afraid of the change in their world. They withdraw from him and Charly finds that he no longer has any friends. Later Charly reflects: "I was wondering why the people who would never dream of laughing at a blind or a crippled man would laugh at a moron?" That's what Charley had been...a moron

So, in our scripture account today, when the townspeople gather to see what has happened to the well-known crazy figure in their community, they find the man, clothed, in his right mind, sitting at the feet of Jesus. What's their reaction? No celebration...no wow...no "Hip, hip, hurray." Why there is not even a complaint about the lost pigs. They are afraid of Jesus. They say to Jesus: Get back on your boat and get away from here. Jesus might just meddle in their lives. With Jesus, living

in the tombs does not have the last say. And Legion—with all its imperial might—does not have the final say. You see, if this man dominated by death and Legion can change, maybe this Jesus would change them? Maybe there will be some cost in that change. Maybe, they just best live without Jesus.

So they ask Jesus to leave...to cross back over to the other side...to go home. Doesn't that sound familiar? People wanting to get Jesus out of their lives? This same scene is repeated during Holy Week in Jerusalem. People demand that Jesus leave...to cross back over. And those same Romans who have legions will provide the means. This time Jesus does not exit on a wooden boat but on a wooden cross.

Jesus leaves...but what about the healed man? He seeks to leave with Jesus...to be done with the community that cannot face the change in him and the potential change in them. But Jesus leaves him behind to declare how much God has done for him...just as Jesus left behind disciples to tell how much God has done through Jesus. He left behind Mary Magdalene and Peter, James and John, and all the rest.

And then isn't that us? Isn't that the church of Jesus Christ? We are "left behind." There is, of course, a whole series of books about being "left behind" based on a misreading of the Bible. In those books, being "left behind" is a bad thing, a failure, a defeat. Jesus leaves us behind...because the world cannot live with him. He leaves us behind to say what God has done for us...that neither death nor the Legion has the final word.

So, here's the clear and unmistakable question in the story today. Remember, it ain't the parts of the Bible that we can't understand that will trouble us. Or, prod us...confront us. Here's the question: Are you in the crowd that says to Jesus, "Get out! Leave us to our tombs and our legion." Or are you "left behind" to keep giving witness to what God has done for you in Jesus? Measure yourself by that question.