

Luke 8:26-39

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. (398)

“Clothed and in his right mind.” That might be a favorite line of mine in all of scripture. “Clothed and in his right mind.” Human dignity. The human dignified. The worthiness of every human to be in that position “clothed and in his right mind.” However we might understand his having gotten there, whatever we might imagine as having kept him from that, this as a goal for all sorts of humanitarian or social justice work to join the human community: clothed and in his right mind.

That said, Gerasa doesn't make much sense as the place where this incident happened. Gerasa is not near the Sea of Galilee. It's miles away from the hills down which that herd of pigs is imagined to have plunged. (Notice, please, they plunged into an abyss just after begging Jesus not to send them back to the abyss., some compulsion that was both abhorrent and irresistible.) It's miles away from the sea that Jesus is just prior to this remembered to have crossed. (Remember, please, as he crossed, the storm that threatened to overwhelm them, but which he rebuked so they'd be kept from themselves being swallowed by the abyss.) Gerasa doesn't make much sense as the place where this incident happened.

And it's evident this has been troublesome throughout the centuries—that it makes little geographical sense. This is a story featured in all three synoptic gospels—Matthew, Mark, and Luke, which, in spite of its troublesome geography, suggests its importance in all sorts of contexts and for all sorts of reasons.

Don't forget, each of our gospel writers were of a particular moment in time and were of a particular community of believers, followers of the Jesus way. Each of them had their bent on things: each decided upon the importance of the many Jesus stories based on that bent—and decided upon the order of how they came in the Jesus story, and even decided on the words best used to tell those many stories. There are differences between the three, even contradictions.

And all of these suggest things about our gospel writers and why they wrote, and for whom they wrote, in ways we can put together so we might more fully understand—more fully understand the history of our faith and how it came to be in history. Not by magic but by inspired people. Not by something wholly transcendent and “inerrant,” but by people “errant” indeed but full of the Holy Spirit and moved to tell the story by which they'd come to live.

We all do this—have stories by which we come to live.

These differences and even contradictions in the many tellings help us also more fully to grasp how very profound was the impact Jesus had. The variations in the stories don't undermine their veracity, they are rather testament to the profundity of it all: Jesus was personal (just ask John), Jesus was political (just ask Mark); Jesus was of God (so says John), Jesus was of humanity (so says Matthew); Jesus created culture (am I right, Luke?), Jesus deconstructed culture (Mark); Jesus was inimical (Mark), Jesus was the model for us all, which imperative that we follow (Luke); Jesus called forth community, Jesus ordained the individual; Jesus was the ancient of days, Jesus was the one who was coming, the past and the future and the ever-present.

Which was it? It was all of it! It is all of it.

Mark's gospel came first, likely written around the very time the Roman war against the Jews was running its hottest. Jerusalem was being destroyed. The Temple had been desecrated, and was even now being reduced to rubble, stone by stone, brought to nothing.

This, of course, would change everything.

Jewish practice had been largely centered around the Temple. For nearly a millennium, to be a Jew meant to be in relation to the Temple. But now that would change—and it would be a traumatic change. Judaism would become diasporic, and its way would be of the book, its practices largely about studying the book. Holidays would be celebrated in the home, among the family and

immediate community, and the way together would be largely about learning, in the schul, in the synagogue.

Until the Temple were to be again.

Two millennia it has been...

Any day now...

Next year in Jerusalem.

At the same time, Christianity was finding its way, and first among Jews, for whom the loss of the Temple in the world would be felt as a sign from God that Jesus would somehow be as a new Temple. It would be around Jesus that this new community would gather and from which it would be sent forth to live.

See, these two, Judaism and Christianity, really are sibling religions, even twins. We might think of Judaism, since older, as progenitor. But both, Judaism as we know it and Christianity as it's always been, understand themselves—rightly—to be bearers of the ancient promise and walking in the ancient way, a continuing of the tradition from time immemorial.

What's more, both come into history at this same terrible moment, the removal of the Temple of any real way of practice.

This was a lecture point from my professor of Judaism at divinity school. An Orthodox Jew, he spoke from the inside. And it's helped me understand the terrible dynamic between Jews and the church, get a bit of handle on it. Sibling rivalry: that's all this is.

But consider the ancient siblings, especially the twins—Cain and Abel, Jacob and Esau, Joseph and all his brothers. Or Remus and Romulus. Sibling rivalry is no joke. We must be very careful here.

Mark's version of this story in Gerasa: Luke, who wrote the gospel lection for this morning and whose gospel we'll be following throughout this liturgical year, would take the cues from that.

Matthew, though, seems to have been troubled by Mark's remembering this whole thing happening in Gerasa, miles away from the hills down which the pigs were said to have run, plunging themselves into the very abyss the legion had begged to avoid. So, Matthew sets this story in Gadara, which is indeed closer to the Sea of Galilee—but still five or so miles away, demanding of these pigs the fitness of a mini-marathon champ.

For what it's worth, tradition and ancient exegesis on this text set the story at Gergasa, a third village, closer still to the sea. Origen, in the 3rd century, claimed this is what the gospel writers must have meant. He wrote, "But Gergesa, from which comes the name the Gergesenes, is an

ancient city in the vicinity of the lake which is now called Tiberias. There is a cliff lying beside this lake from which they point out the swine were cast down by the demons.”

For his part, Luke stays with Gerasa, which surprises me, to be honest. Luke likes his narrative to make logical sense. For example, Luke clears up a lot of the ambiguity of Mark’s version of this. Like, Luke explains that this man was always naked before explaining that, once healed, he was now clothed (and in his right mind). And before we see the man emerge from the tombs Luke tells us he’s otherwise homeless, has been living among the tombs, living among the dead, as if he himself were dead.

Nonetheless, Luke stays with Gerasa—and maybe because it makes a certain sort of sense.

Gerasa is a word whose root also means “banish,” as this man had been banished, as that which kept him banished would soon itself be banished. In the village of banish, what would soon be banished is the very act of banishing.

What’s more Gerasa had a certain history. Twenty or so years prior to Luke’s writing this narrative, in the year 66, a Roman legion took the town. These several thousand troops, killed all the men, took as captives the women and children. They burned down the houses, and then the houses in the surrounding villages. Eventually, war engulfed the entire hill country—war as abyss. It swallows up everything once it gets loose.

This was Gerasa—a name as tied to its recent past as Chernobyl is for us, just a village in north central Ukraine, right?

But there’s still more. Roman legions often had emblems, worn as insignia on uniforms to identify to what unit each soldier belonged. One legion’s emblem, Legio 10th Fretensis, was the pig. This was a legion that participated in sacking Jerusalem. This was the legion stationed in Jerusalem after the war in the 2nd century. The pig: printed on banners, on bricks and coins, on common objects to honor and celebrate this accomplished force, to make their presence known and felt.

But they too would eventually fall. Everything does. Even the mightiest. Even the most terrible. It’s just a matter of how much they destroy before they do, how much of the hillside they trample before falling themselves into the abyss.

So, Luke might have figured, Gerasa made a certain sort of sense for this, for this man who was naked and living among the tombs, filled himself with a social trauma, filled himself with a whole history that’s tough indeed to shake.

This can happen, you know. A person can become occupied by a whole history, in a way. A person can become possessed (let’s say) by a traumatic past that transmits through shared memory,

through intergenerational means. Call it what you will. Luke called it demons. The gospel writers all did. That might be tough to take for us these days. But what would you call it? Or would you deny it? Are people really just individuals, buffered selves as Charles Taylor came to call “modern man,” unaffected by social circumstance, unpenetrated by others or the past or anything. Self-made. Self-actualized. Self-determined. “I got this.”

I wish.

I have an acquaintance, someone I knew in high school. Native American, she lives on a reservation in Montana for the Northern Cheyenne. She went to Exeter, then Stanford, has a law degree from Colorado. She exercises real, felt power for good. But sometimes it gets to her—her social world sometimes gripped as if by seizure. Kids die on the reservation; women die. So many people she knows, kids her daughter’s age. They kill themselves accidentally or on purpose. I don’t know why violence is so pervasive. Mildly so, though. Like white noise, it’s ordinary. Like tinnitus in your ear. Always there. I don’t know why, but I can fairly guess.

“From the moment the demoniac first confronts Jesus, the whole episode invites us to consider what Jesus has to do with the forces that occupy and control us.” That’s priest and scholar Judith Jones writing. “...it challenges us to think more broadly about Jesus’ sovereignty over the powers that destroy human life.”

Here’s how Luke does it—in his writing of the man “confronting” Jesus. This verb, “confronting,” Luke uses elsewhere to speak of armies meeting in battle. It’s as if he meant to imply this demon were indeed of a military legion.

And when the demon “seizes” the man, that’s a verb our writer uses in his second book, the Book of Acts, to speak of Christians arrested by Romans and brought to trial. It’s as if he meant to suggest it’s the same thing, someone’s called to good purpose but gets seized and stopped up.

Rev. Jones also notices, “The words for the hand and foot chains, for binding and guarding, are the same ones that Luke uses in Acts when the disciples are imprisoned. In short, the language of the whole episode evokes the experience of living under a brutal occupying power.” Which, if demons don’t have much traction these days, brutal occupying powers nonetheless do, sad to say.

Which has her wondering, this Rev. Jones: “How many people in our world are haunted by a traumatic past and tortured by memories? How many live unsheltered and inadequately clothed because of social and economic forces that they cannot overcome, no matter how hard they

struggle? How many are imprisoned, regarded as barely human, excluded, cast out? How many are enslaved by addiction” or held captive by though long-debunked, yet still real and ensnaring, racism?

It’s Juneteenth today.

It’s Juneteenth! The day in 1865, June 19th, when the last enslaved Black people were finally made free, in far-flung Texas, recalcitrant Texas. Holding its enslaved two and a half years after President Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation, slave-holders in the furthest flung regions finally relented on June 19th, 1865.

And so it’s been celebrated since 1866, the earliest celebrations taking place in Black churches, where Black people have long been allowed their dignity, even when everywhere else in America they were denied that. In church, they could be clothed and their right minds, so to speak—

or, rather, in *their* churches. In White churches, they were often consigned to the balcony, as at First Church in Pittsfield, which is why Black members there split off in the 19th century and founded Second Church in Pittsfield, Samuel Harrison’s church, he who founded it, he who eventually also became the chaplain to the 54th Regiment of Massachusetts during the Civil War, an all-Black regiment.

As for here in Lenox, Church on the Hill, W.E.B DuBois was known to spend time here, hanging out with his friend James van der Zee whose grandfather and then father were our sextons—not exactly full membership, though maybe we played *some* part in forming these into men of arts and letters.

Though maybe we didn’t.

We have to be open to the possibility that our legacy is less than we might like, maybe even far less. Really, we might have more demon than dignifier.

It’s Juneteenth today, a holiday that marks the tragic fact of delayed justice, the terrible ensnaring that can be so long in letting go. Injustice occupies history; indignity haunts humanity, looking for an opportunity, looking for enablers. I won’t *praise* patience among those whose suffering has already been long, indeed. Who am I to preach such patience in face of ensnaring injustice? I won’t *praise* those whose jubilation has been delayed by brutal injustice slow to die. Who am I to applaud jubilation that finds cause to celebrate late in time? Instead, I’ll step back at the sight of these things—gratitude where resentment might have come to dwell, jubilation where vengeance might have found footing: wow. Amazing grace.

Juneteenth is for all to celebrate, those who'd have been enslaved, those who'd have been enslavers; those who'd have been as the living dead and those who'd have been as demon making it so.

It's good and right to wonder truthfully which you'd have been. And it's good and right to do such a thing here, where it's enacted every Sunday that there's hope for us all.

Thanks be to God.