

Sermon for Sunday, January 21, 2024

Mark 5:1-20

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to you Oh Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

It is important to begin this sermon by naming the “in your face” challenge of this Scripture reading. As listeners we are quick to frame a diagnosis for the demoniac named in this story: we assume that he has a mental illness. And that may be accurate. The problem though is that the next thing that happens in our minds is that we are immediately reminded of people that they know that struggle with mental illness. And this text makes us afraid for them—afraid that their illness is going to go out of control and that they are going to end up “out there in the tombs.” There are many among us who struggle with mental illness challenges at many levels and intensities—so for those of you who do not face this challenge personally remember that this passage speaks to people in ways you can’t imagine.

One of the triggers within this passage is the unpredictability and outright violence that the demoniac displays. The man with the demons/mental illness was unpredictable. The people around him wanted to control him; maybe they wanted to keep him safe; maybe they wanted him to fit into their framework of living normally. Since he acted at times with violence they were afraid for themselves; that he would physically hurt them. This unpredictability makes the entire situation untenable. As the Bible tells it in their desire to control him they tried restraints with chains and shackles—restraints that he simply ripped away and cast aside.

Another aspect of the challenge of this passage is that we listeners/readers tend to focus on the demoniac and not on Jesus. Let’s take some time now to focus on Jesus—after all he is the point— isn’t he?

This story is a story of Jesus going to the other side. How many “other sides” does Jesus enter in this story?

- The other side of the Sea of Galilee. He is now in Gentile territory, not Jewish territory. In other places Jesus says that he came to bring the good news to his people: the Jews. But he has gotten into a boat and journeyed to an area where many former Roman soldiers now live. (a bit of

history: Roman soldiers were often promised a parcel of land in payment for their military service. This region of the Decapolis was an area where retired military would settle.)

- The other side meaning a place of death and decay. As one commentator put it: [the demoniac] does not simply happen to be there that day: this place of death and decay is his habitat. This is where he lives, all day, every day. Jesus has entered a place where no one would go unless it was forced upon them. Jesus goes willingly to the place where outcasts reside.
- The other side meaning Jesus has interactions with a man who lives among the corpses because no one can bind him, let alone set him free from the evil that claims him (verse 3). Jesus talks to a man not only surrounded by death but one who is stuck in a hopelessly fixed state of death. Jesus goes “to the other side” in this one particular man’s life.

Let’s turn now from the idea that Jesus has gone to the other side to consider the larger purpose of this story. What is Mark, the gospel writer, trying to teach us about Jesus?

- There is a gap between the parables that were read last week and the beginning of today’s reading. In that gap we learn that Jesus leaves his “teaching place” and enters a boat so as to “go to the other side.” A great windstorm came up while Jesus was sleeping. In great fear the disciples awaken him and he calms the sea. Mark includes this story in his gospel to emphasize Jesus’ identity as one who has power over wind and waves. Jesus is God—the one who can command creation.
- Having just learned that Jesus can command creation we are now witness to Jesus as the one who can command demons. Jesus, the Son of the Most High God who has authority over forces of evil that oppose God’s good reign. Even though Jesus is outnumbered, he is not fazed. He subdues the enemy and puts them to utter shame. Jesus has the power that no one else has to deliver the demoniac who was suffering a death by a thousand cuts (quite literally). It is only Jesus who can restore the health, dignity, agency, peace, and place in the world of the man who had lost everything.

It is tempting at this point to say, “And they all lived happily ever after.” But this story doesn’t end this way.

1. The townspeople quickly become deeply frightened at Jesus’ exhibition of power and beg him to leave. They did not flock

to him with their burdens and problems. They did not submit to his power. They did not receive him into their midst. No, they expelled him from their city as they had the demoniac (verse 17). Their frightened plea to Jesus to leave their city is reminiscent of the terrified demons begging Jesus to leave them alone.

2. And what of the demoniac? It is not surprising that he also begs Jesus. But instead of rejecting Jesus he asks to follow him; to be a part of his ongoing ministry. Jesus' response is surprising for he tells the healed man to go home to his friends and tell them how much the Lord has done for you. In other words, be a witness to the power of Jesus as God's Son. Certainly this witness will have a strong impact on everyone who knew of this man's demonic possession. It's a curious thing to consider that this man has one powerful encounter with Jesus and Jesus seems to think that it is enough. We have no evidence that the healed man spends any additional time with Jesus like the 12 disciples. He is healed and telling of this experience is enough.
3. Paul said it like this in his letter to the church in Ephesus: "Our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places" (Ephesians 6:12). Day to day, we may not see an agonized demoniac wrenching chains, but we are well acquainted with people struggling with demons. Not so much literal demons but physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual demons.
4. These "demons" can be physical: think of people that you know who have received a grim diagnosis: cancer, Parkinson's disease, meningitis. The "demon" can be mental: think of people who struggle with depression or bipolar disease. The "demon" can be emotional: think of people who are always angry; sometimes we label them with "hair trigger" feelings. The demon can be spiritual: the struggle to believe in God in the midst of a world full of suffering.

Thus far through our reading of Mark's gospel we have been witness to Jesus' power over creation through the stilling of the wind, and Jesus' power over the demonic forces in this world as he frees this man held captive and binds up the demons by sending them into a herd of pigs. Next Sunday we will be witness to

another of Jesus' power when he raises a young girl from the dead—back to life.

This is the God we follow. This is the God we believe in. The one who has power over creation; the one who has power over the forces of evil in our world, the one who has power over death itself. Keep your eyes on Jesus my friends. It's easy to turn our sights onto the challenges and brokenness of this world. When you recognize that it has happened in your life, turn back, turn back to Jesus.