

Living Among the Tombs

Jesus and his disciples came to the other side of the lake, to the region of the Gerasenes. As soon as Jesus got out of the boat, a man possessed by an evil spirit came out of the tombs. This man lived among the tombs, and no one was ever strong enough to restrain him, even with a chain. He had been secured many times with leg irons and chains, but he broke the chains and smashed the leg irons. No one was tough enough to control him. Night and day in the tombs and the hills, he would howl and cut himself with stones. When he saw Jesus from far away, he ran and knelt before him, shouting, "What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? Swear to God that you won't torture me!" He said this because Jesus had already commanded him, "Unclean spirit, come out of the man!" Jesus asked him, "What is your name?" He responded, "Legion is my name, because we are many." They pleaded with Jesus not to send them out of that region. A large herd of pigs was feeding on the hillside. "Send us into the pigs!" they begged. "Let us go into the pigs!" Jesus gave them permission, so the unclean spirits left the man and went into the pigs. Then the herd of about two thousand pigs rushed down the cliff into the lake and drowned. Those who tended the pigs ran away and told the story in the city and in the countryside. People came to see what had happened. They came to Jesus and saw the man who used to be demon-possessed. They saw the very man who had been filled with many demons sitting there fully dressed and completely sane, and they were [afraid]¹. Those who had actually seen what had happened to the demon-possessed man told the others about the pigs. Then they pleaded with Jesus to leave their region. While he was climbing into the boat, the one who had been demon-possessed pleaded with Jesus to let him come along as one of his disciples. But Jesus wouldn't allow it. "Go home to your own people," Jesus said, "and tell them what the Lord has done for you and how he has shown you mercy." The man went away and began to proclaim in the Ten Cities all that Jesus had done for him, and everyone was amazed.

Mk. 5:1-20 (C.E.B.)

When I first started working on this sermon, I was struck by the image of a man who was living among the tombs (Mk. 5:3). It caused me to think of people who are un-housed here in Wichita. Would a cemetery be a better place to stay than under the overpass of a busy road? It might be quieter there. The ground might be softer, but there would be less protection from the wind and rain. Would it be better than sleeping in the doorway of an office building downtown, such as the man I saw Friday night?

And how would it affect the feelings of those who come to the cemetery to bury their loved ones? What would they think if they saw someone sleeping nearby as they gather for a graveside service?

As I was puzzling over this, I noticed a subtle part of this story.

This takes place at the end of a very long day. Jesus has been busy preaching and teaching and healing. He is exhausted, so Jesus tells his disciples to cross over to the other side of the lake where they can find respite (Mk. 4:35). He's so tired, he falls asleep in the boat as they cross the lake (Mk. 4:35, 38). I don't know if they arrive later that night or early in the morning. Either one is possible, although it's less likely they would stay out on the water overnight. So, I'm thinking this is at dusk, when shadows are fading into the darkness of night.

As soon as they get out of the boat, they see a man walking towards them, coming out of the cemetery (Mk. 5:2). In the dark. It doesn't matter if it's dusk or dawn. How spooky would that look to them? What if it was foggy like so many mornings this week?

Clearly Jesus is not afraid. But what about the disciples? What about those who were tending the pigs (Mk. 5:14)?

¹ NRSV and NIV both translate it as fear; CEB translates it as awe.

The way Mark tells the story it sounds as if this man has no choice about where he is living. People don't want to deal with him in town, since they can't tie him up to make everyone else safe (Mk. 5:4). So, he moves to the cemetery. Living among the tombs is safer for him because no one will bother him there – and from the perspective of the people in town, it's far enough removed they know he won't bother them.

Of course, living among the dead also makes him unclean. That means he is unclean, unwelcome, and undesirable.

Our modern tendency is to assume this man's plight is a matter of mental illness rather than a demon. I'm not well enough versed in the current DSM to suggest a diagnosis, but I'm sure there is at least one that fits the description we have of him. We might envision him as a man who needs to be in a mental health facility, rather than a cemetery.

It's how we discount the sense of the demonic. We want to name his disorder because we don't want to believe there are demons. Rather than attributing things to demons, we often find other ways to explain mysterious events. Haunted houses, UFOs, spooky cloud formations show up at Halloween, but very few people give them the kind of credibility Biblical society gave to demons.

There are exceptions, of course. Maybe you know some people who speak about the demons in their lives or in our world. More often, we say demons show up wherever we hear of genocide or terrorism or human trafficking. Evil also shows up when we encounter compulsive liars and people who love power and money rather than God or our neighbors.²

Some people do talk about their memories or habits as if they are demons, voices that keep echoing in their heads and keep them from sleeping. They may be real, but those aren't like the demons Jesus casts out.

Of course, there was also the request I had once from the administrator of a nursing home. She said that one room was haunted. She knew that because three consecutive residents who occupied that room complained of dreams where there was a young girl that kept waking them up.

The administrator asked me to come and exorcise the room.

I wasn't sure I was the right person for the job. But I was her pastor, so I decided I would do what I could do. Rather than completely discounting the story, and rather than fully embracing her belief, I tried to walk the middle road.

I mean, what if the "demon" was an aide who was merely checking on the residents who all spoke about it as if it were a dream and not a person doing their job?

I prepared for the event by praying and fasting. I figured if it was real, I needed to be spiritually ready. I couldn't find any liturgy for the event, but I came with oil for anointing and anointed the room and said some prayers.

Two days later, the administrator called to tell me it worked. Well, it worked for about two years. Then she called me again, and I did it all again. The second time it seemed to have worked. At least I never got called back.

² Ahmi Lee at WorkingPreacher.org

So, was it really a demon that was exorcised? Was it the ghost of someone? Does it matter? I used the power of prayer and responded to an unexplainable event. And God worked a miracle.

That's one explanation. But what if the work I did convinced the staff there were no more demons to be found and their reactions changed the circumstances for the occupant of that room? What if it was really a figment of their imagination that I helped eliminate?

I'll never know. But it has caused me to look at these Biblical stories of demons with a different lens than I had before.

What if, for example, the real problem in this text isn't the people others think are demon-possessed? What if the real problem is the society that demonizes others?³ What if this man's mental health issues make his neighbors see *him* as the problem, forcing him to live in the cemetery rather than creating a more workable mental health system?

Or worse, what if they have used him as a scapegoat for their own demons?

It makes me wonder who we have demonized and excluded from society, and why. How have we put people on the margins by the way we treat them?

- Some people would say we do that to those who are unhoused.
- And I know I cringe every time I hear someone refer to immigrants as aliens, as if they belong on another planet.
- I also know some Democrats who demonize Republicans.
- And there are some Republicans who demonize Democrats.

Too many people want to see their enemies in the cemetery – not necessarily to live there, though.

Are there demons in our society that we refuse to deal with? Is it possible we push them onto others by demonizing them, blaming them for our problems, rather than allowing Jesus to free us? Maybe *we* are the ones who are living among the tombs.

The demons in this text make a case for that possibility. They tell Jesus their name is Legion, connecting them to the Roman occupation forces (Mk. 5:9). No one was more demonized by society than the Roman soldiers were. And by the way, the particular Roman Legion in this territory used a boar's head as a mascot.⁴ Maybe the intent of entering the pigs was to rile up the Romans. Maybe it provides a means to avoid working through whatever demons they were hiding from.

Never mind the obvious. Never mind that pigs are unclean. Never mind the fact that the farmers can only sell their pigs to the Romans. In other words, they are in collusion with the oppressors, a collusion that requires them to scapegoat a man who is probably innocent.

Maybe the issue isn't the man who is possessed by a demon as much as a community that refuses to deal with their own.

Micah Kiel tells about teaching this story in a church in Iowa once, in an area where the farmers raised pigs.⁵ One of the farmers decided he needed to teach the teacher. This farmer pointed out that pigs can't swim.

³ Geddert, p. 117

⁴ I know I read this in my preparation for this sermon, but I could not find it again to document it!

⁵ WorkingPreacher.org

And with a herd of pigs dying in the lake there would have been an environmental disaster as well as a financial disaster for the farmers.

Mark seems to suggest the locals are afraid of Jesus because of the power he displays (Mk. 5:15). The Iowa farmer says they are probably angry with Jesus for destroying their livestock and polluting their water supply.

If that is the case, the demon-possessed man is clearly less important than their pigs – or their demons. The man used to be safely living among the tombs. It was their way of domesticating their own demons.

The man may indeed have had a debilitating mental illness, but no one had to deal with him. He was out of sight and out of mind. They had safely marginalized him. And in doing so, they didn't need to ask the hard questions about their own practices. He was no longer a threat, and they were safe – until Jesus frees him from his circumstances.

When the man is healed, he asks to follow Jesus rather than face his neighbors (Mk. 5:18). It makes me believe his ostracism was not solved by Jesus, that he was still going to be the scapegoat for the sins of the community.

Instead of inviting him to join him, however, Jesus tells the man to reintroduce himself to the community (Mk. 5:19). I wonder how that worked out for him.

I also wonder how that worked for the people in town!

Of course, the point of the story is that living in God's Kingdom requires us to have a new set of values, one where people are more important than money, a world in which we love our enemies, a place where reconciliation is prioritized over demonization.

According to Mark, God's Kingdom breaks into the world at God's direction, not ours. We might prefer to find a scapegoat. We might try to deal with our problems by blaming someone else and then excluding them.

But ostracism and segregation are not tenable in God's Kingdom.

The story of a man who lived among the tombs is often seen as a puzzling one, one we might shy away from. But I've come to believe it is actually a gift to the church. You see, it reminds us that Jesus, is the Son of the Most High God (Mk. 5:7). He has both the power to bind the strong man and to break the chains of captives – including a society that prefers to domesticate our demons rather than exorcising them.

May God free us and heal us.

Amen.

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