

**PAUL'S PREDECESSOR**  
**Sermon, June 20, 2010**  
**Father's Day**  
**Text: Luke 8:26-39**

Long before the Pharisee Saul had the transforming vision of Jesus on the Damascus Road that made him the apostle Paul, missionary to the Gentiles, Jesus had sent another missionary to proclaim the good news to the Gentiles. We read of him this morning.

The region of the Gerasenes was on the non-Jewish side of the Sea of Galilee, and the "Geresene demoniac" in our reading seems nothing like the "normal" people in that community. He is "out of his mind." He runs around naked. Mark tells us that day and night this man would cry out in his loneliness, and cut himself with stones. He is strong enough to break out of any chains and shackles. He lives in the graveyard, dwelling with the dead. Yet he is *not* a monster. He is human being, a human being in need of salvation. And where others just saw a crazy person, Jesus saw the man ... just as we talked about last week, when we noted He saw the woman where the religious leader could only see the sinner. Jesus sees a human being made in the good image of his Father. And when Jesus confronted and banished the evil from this man, the man was restored, filled with a new identity and a new mission. He became the first missionary to the Gentiles .... but I'm jumping ahead to the end of the story.

Whenever we come across a Bible text that talks about demons, it's tempting to skip that part and just keep reading. But, as I've mentioned before, if we were to cut out all the Bible passages that referred to demons, we would end up with a real "Holey" Bible ... demons and their activity are frequently mentioned in these pages. And if you stay with Jesus, you will find dealing with the demonic unavoidable. That's because Jesus is the Savior, and it is the nature of the Savior to go places where evil has taken over, where evil is sucking the life and the spirit right out of people. If you truly follow Jesus, you will confront the demonic.

Confrontation is never comfortable; one reason most of us would avoid it is that we often have to confront ourselves in the process. I'm reminded of the story of the poor choir member whose enthusiasm for the task dwarfed his talent ... he really had a terrible singing voice. So terrible, in fact, that the other choir members came to the pastor asking him to gently confront this man about the reality of his terrible voice and convince him to quit the choir. Reluctantly, the pastor did as he was asked. He told the man church members were saying he could not sing, so he should quit. To which the man responded, "Well, Pastor, church members are saying you can't preach, but you don't hear me telling YOU to quit." Confrontation is never comfortable, for more often than not it involves confronting our weaknesses in the process! Jesus is constantly engaged in confrontation with that which is evil and demonic ... and make no mistake about it, that confrontation begins right here, in our hearts.

Can any of us deny there is still an evil at work in this world? If so, then you are just not paying attention; some things can only be explained by the existence of evil. And demonic possession is not just some "relic" of an earlier time. Maybe your demon comes in a bottle. Maybe your demon comes to you on a card table, or a food table, or a one-armed bandit. Maybe your demon comes in a shopping mall or a so-called adult internet site (it's somehow oxymoronic to refer to these sites as "adult", but that's another sermon). Maybe your demon is a critical spirit that just won't let you see the good in anything. Or maybe you are possessed by your possessions. Demons have more to do than we think with so-called common and seemingly innocuous things and attitudes and "little temptations" that are actually taking over our lives.

Jesus and His disciples boarded a ship and sailed across the Sea of Galilee until they arrived at this desolate shore. The first person who greeted them was this man who had been driven crazy by demons. You have to know this man had a history before he was tormented by demons. Certainly he was somebody's son; when he was born, surely his parents had hoped for a different kind of future for him. Maybe he was somebody's husband. It's possible he was somebody's father. He was a man driven out of his mind and away from home by the demons that plagued him. Some of you here this morning love people like this man. When Jesus asked him his name, it was the demons within who answered, "*Legion! We are a legion, for we are many.*" And, the text tells us, they answered LOUDLY, as if they are trying to drown out any competing voices of sanity or salvation.

Some of you can relate to this man. After a while we start to hear so many different (and LOUD) voices clamoring for attention, banging around inside your head trying to tell you who you are or who you should be. There's the voice that tells you, "You ought to feel ashamed for the things you have done! Sure you've asked forgiveness, but how can God can't forgive you for that." There's that voice that never stops, "You got to work harder and harder and harder, you aren't doing enough!" There's the contradictory voice that tells you, "You've worked too hard, you've done too much, and now you're destroying your family in the process!" And there are all

the voices that constantly echo, "You are not good enough. You are not smart enough. You are not pretty enough. You are not *(fill in the blank)* enough!"

Some of us just keep hearing those evil, vile, loud voices to the point where they've distorted our hearing, so much so that we no longer hear the soft, gentle voice of God's spirit, the voice of the God Who created you and who called your life GOOD. Demonic voices and desires always try to muffle the voice of God. Because we can't hear God's voice, and because we hear all these other voices trying to tell us who we are, when Jesus asks us our name, we are tempted to respond like this man who is being tormented by demons, "My name is Legion! Because there is a mob of voices trying to tell me who I am and what I should do! Jesus: which me do you want? Do you want the ME that showed up for church today looking so holy and together and respectable? Or do you want the me that is more compromised and hurt? Do you want the me that is frightened and confused? Do you want the angry me, or the guilty me? Which me do you want, Jesus, because I'm not really sure who the real me is anymore." It feels as if we are shackled and bound by all these competing demands, all these different voices telling us who we should be, and we just want to burst these shackles and run away.

It is fascinating in the Gospels to see that demons are the only ones who consistently recognize Jesus for Who He is. They're the only ones. Even the disciples never get it right until after the Resurrection. But as soon as the demons see Jesus, they recognize Him. They take this troubled man, throw him down at Jesus feet, and then begin begging Jesus not to throw them into the Abyss. They beg Jesus to send them over to the pigs. You know, this is one of the most hopeful images of the Bible ... evil down on its knees begging before Jesus! The demons understand Jesus is the Son of God who has invaded their evil corner of the world ... and they beg because they know once Jesus has come on the scene evil can never be seen as normal again! Do you understand the power of this? More to the point, have you *encountered* the power of this? Now that Jesus is here, nothing on earth or in hell can withstand the power of a God who has decided to be merciful ... and evil is on the run.

When the demons took possession of the pigs instead of the man, the pigs were not about to live with this, so they rushed down into the water and drowned themselves. When those tending the pigs saw what happened, they ran back to town and told everyone about it; the text then tells us all the people came out. As soon as they find Jesus, they ask Him if He wouldn't mind getting back in His boat, leave and never come back. Why is that? Is it because they are angry; after all, this man sent their local economy over the cliff, and who's going to pay for all this deviled ham floating in the bay? (*When we made brief reference to this passage last July, Jim Ruegg commented this was the original case of the Swine Flew ... they flew themselves off the cliff*). No, that's not what the text tells us. The text tells us that when they arrive and saw the demoniac now sitting down, fully clothed, gentle, in his right mind, talking to Jesus ... they were afraid. They were terrified, because this man had been made well! No one ran up to this man and said, "Oh, man, I'm so glad you are better! Welcome back! We missed you while you were crazy, come on home, your family is waiting for you ..." No, they're afraid of what Jesus has done.

Perhaps they're afraid because they know if Jesus got rid of the evil in this man, then if He were to stay around He would also get rid of the evil in their lives, and maybe they have grown used to the way it is. So they ask Him to go away. I think the most frightening part of this passage is that when the townspeople asked Jesus to leave, He did. He got back in his boat and sailed away, and as far as we know, they never heard from Jesus again.

Every time Jesus appears, it confronts you with a great choice. Either you are going to have to let Him stay and change everything about your life, or you're going to have to ask Jesus to go away and leave you alone. Those are the only two choices you have. Jesus will not force His grace on you. But if you ask Jesus to stay, it's going to change everything. You'll have to stop getting used to sin. And you're going to have to listen only to the voice of Jesus to remember who you are.

Just as Jesus was getting back in the boat, the man he had healed came running up and asked if he could leave this place of bad memories and go with Jesus. But Jesus said "No." "No. You stay here, and *return to your home*, and tell everyone there what God has done for you." Jesus says, "Go home and tell them the story. Tell them what God has done. Tell it to the people you hurt when you went crazy. Tell it to the people who hurt you so much they drove you crazy. Tell them you have learned how to forgive, and how to be forgiven."

If your life has been touched by Jesus ... if you have discovered that being forgiven is better than being evil, that being faithful and sane is better than being faithless and tormented ... then the first place Jesus is going to send you is right back home. Back to your family, back to your office, back to your school. After all, the townspeople may be frightened of Jesus, but they might listen to someone they knew, and they would hear from this person they know of God's goodness and grace revealed in Jesus. Jesus loves that part of the world where you live, and He has called you to be there to testify that change is possible. And your world today is dying for all the symbols of hope they can find. And so the man went away and proclaimed to everyone in the town what Jesus had done for him.

What about you? What will you be proclaiming in your town this week?