

A Powerful Story

Proper 7, Year C – Luke 8:26-39

preached by the Rector at St. Paul's, Henderson, June 23, 2013

Lord, take my eyes and see through them. Take my lips and speak through them. Take my soul and set it on fire with love for thee. Amen.

It's not my fault. I take full accountability for the punch line of my story a few weeks ago in which Arnold the multi-talented pig met his sudden end as someone's breakfast. I know some of you were a bit perturbed with the end of that story, but I am not responsible for *this* herd of swine running off a cliff and drowning. This is someone else's story altogether, so this time I simply will *not* accept responsibility for making you feel guilty about the ribs you may be planning to barbeque later.

With that out of the way, let's go ahead and take a look at the famous (or infamous) story of the Gerasene Demoniac. The story doesn't get a lot of attention in preaching these days. Though I have read and heard some sermons based on this story over the years, I have seldom had occasion to use it in a sermon – and I *know* I haven't done so here. In fact, until we started using the Revised Common Lectionary a few years back, this text didn't even come up in the Sunday reading rotation. And that's a shame, really, because there's some really good stuff here, and some of it's pretty *funny* if you come at it from the right angle.

On one really important level, the story is a hoot – the whole scene is somewhere between a ridiculous political cartoon and a bizarre graphic novel. You've got a naked crazy guy. You've got a whole battalion of chit-chatty demons. You've got charging pigs doing swan dives off a cliff. You've got tombs, shackles and chains, freaked-out locals, and a small riot. And all of it takes place in Gentile territory, where, as far Luke seems to be concerned, Jesus had no business being in the first place. The folks who first heard this story must have absolutely *loved* it, because, in addition to the great action and snappy dialogue, this story even throws in a goodly dose of *always* popular regional rivalry. What could be more fun for the good Jews of Galilee than a story about how un-kosher, unlucky, and generally weird the Gentiles on the other side of the lake really were. And how about how all those unclean pigs came to a well-deserved and pretty *hilarious* end.

A couple thousand years later, of course, we have a hard time hearing anything *but* the comedy in this story, what with all this talk about demons and possession and such. These days, we don't *do* demons – at least not much. We don't have a category for that. But the fact is that the folks in Jesus' time had a different way of seeing reality than we do. Of course, we see things differently than folks in the 10th century or the 17th century did, for that matter. Sometimes when I think of some of the cutting edge things I learned in school a few decades ago, I know that some ways of looking at things have changed in just that time. And I'm confident that in another handful of decades, there will be a still different way of seeing the world – different categories, different ways of naming and organizing the stuff we experience, and so on.

The fact is that the way we look at things changes all the time, but the truth – well, that *doesn't* change. You see, the Gerasene demoniac had more to worry about than his demons. One demon or a thousand, this man was cut off from family, absolutely separated from any possibility of friendship, companionship, or help, cast out from community – chained outside of all the relationships, all the connections that make a life truly *human*. We may not be able to relate to demons and possessed porcine parades, but most of us know *way* too well the sense of isolation, the awareness of being apart, that condemnation, and ridicule, and disdain, that was part of what drove this man to live his life among the wastes and the tombs of *other* men's lives.

And yet, one demon or a thousand, by the time Jesus got through with him, the man that had lived perhaps a *lifetime* as the Gerasene demoniac was not only loosed from his chains and in his right mind, he was, as Jesus told him, ready to *go home*.

The way we describe the powers arrayed against us may have changed and they certainly will continue to do so. But those categories don't really matter that much. Whether we live in a world full of

demons or schizophrenics, a world of vengeful storm-gods or indifferent natural laws, a world of possession or disease, decay and death – regardless of the categories we use to describe it, we know *for a fact* that we live in a broken and dangerous world. However we see them, however we try to make sense of them, there are powers out there that can, and do, hurt and isolate and torment and destroy – just as surely as demons or madness or storms.

You see, the story of the Gerasene demoniac is much more than a mildly comic interlude in Jesus' Galilean ministry. It's a story about power. Like the calming of the storm on the sea, like the healing of a centurion's servant, like the raising of the widows only son, this morning's story is another part of Luke's prelude to the big truth that is revealed when Jesus asks his disciples, "Who do *you* say that I am?" All the healings, and all the casting out of demons, and all the preaching and the teaching and the story telling, are about much more than what Jesus said or did, they are about who Jesus *is*. When you cut through the sometimes wonderful, sometimes wild, sometimes just plain *weird* plot twists, regardless of the way we look at it and talk about it, the *truth* is that all of these stories have to do with who will actually have the last word.

At the end of the day, when the story comes to its conclusion, when all is said, and when all is done, it doesn't *matter* what powers are lined up against us. Regardless of how we name them or organize them or categorize them, regardless of how substantial or ephemeral they may be, regardless of how overwhelming they may seem in the moment or overshadowing they appear to our future, the powers of this world that build to bind and enslave us, the powers of this world that consolidate and conspire to isolate and alienate us, will *not* have the last word. Because the love through whom the universe was sung into creation, the love that brought the eternal Son of God to live as one of us, the love that drove the Sinless One to the hard wood of the cross for your sins and mine, the love of Jesus Christ is more mighty than a whole *army* of demons, the love of Christ is more potent than the very worst that the world can *possibly* throw at us, the love of Christ pursues and fights to bind us to himself and with one another more powerfully than the whole *universe* might work to tear us away.

And, you know, regardless of the way we look at it, the *truth* is that that's who Jesus *is*.