

PROPER 7, June 23, 2019, Year C

- With his disciples, Jesus has traveled to the *opposite* side of the Sea of Galilee, to *Gentile* territory. As Luke tells it, *Jesus has chosen* to go to an area where he would *not only encounter* Gentiles, it is where he will be *surrounded* by them. What makes this so odd, is Jesus' statement to a *Canaanite woman*, in a parallel story in Matthew: "*I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.*" If *that* was true, *why in the world would Jesus choose to go a place where he was not likely to find those particular sheep?* Tom Wright speculates about this ~ that Jesus may have felt a need for a temporary escape from the "pressure of traveling around under the nose of Herod Antipas."¹
- For Jesus and his disciples to travel *by boat* over the Sea of Galilee, was *risky*. The people of Israel were not natural seafarers, and some fished in boats *out of necessity* rather than *love*. But their whole tradition was permeated by *a sense that the sea was dangerous* ~ that it represented something *antithetical* to God, and to God's *purposes*. We see this in the watery *chaos* of *Creation*; in the killing *Flood* at the time of Noah; through the *Red Sea's* deadly waters for Pharaoh's soldiers; and in Joshua's risky crossing of the *Jordan*. Or think of the Psalms' sea monster, *Leviathan*, along with Jonah's *storm and the great fish*; and the later Revelation *beast* from the sea ~ *they all, exemplify a suspicion about how water can kill and destroy.*² Surely, this is why Luke precedes our story by telling us about how *Jesus stills the storm* during the prior night's voyage.³ *So why does Luke want us to know about Jesus' journey across the Sea of Galilee, to Gentile territory?* Why does he tell us about Jesus' *risk* in taking such a perilous path toward getting there?
- We see that *Jesus deliberately goes into a region where Gentiles live. To the people of Israel, the pagan societies of Greece and Rome signified a culture of death rather than one of life.* We should not be surprised, then, that Jesus encounters a demon-possessed man who lives *within the tombs*

of a cemetery. Quite aside from the demons inhabiting him, *the possessed man is unclean from living in a place for the dead*. So then, *is it merely a small detail or a coincidence* that the *the demons are called "Legion?"* For this name refers to a cohort of pagan Roman soldiers! Or, that *–after they are released from the possessed man–* the demons enter into what for Jews are *the ritually unclean and forbidden swine?*

- I invite you to look at the handout image of this scene that I have put with your worship bulletin. Here, in one of *the beautiful Magdeburg Ivories*, we see Jesus commanding the demon to come out of the man, who is held by friends, with the swine at his feet. The expelled demon looks like the fallen angel *that it is*, emerging from the possessed man's mouth.
- Notice how Jesus, *in Luke as well as in this image*, engages the possessed man *directly*. He shows no concern for his own safety, or his spiritual defilement from contact with a demon-possessed Gentile. Luke describes how *the demons defer to Jesus and his implicit authority*. They beg him to spare them from a return to *the abyss*, the realm of the dead symbolized by the depths of the sea. Jesus *might* have responded by ordering the demons *to simply leave the man*. *They would then have remained among the tombs*, as a continuing danger to the nearby Gentile city. *But, he permits them to leave the possessed man and enter a herd of pigs*, which immediately rush down the hillside ~ *ironically, right into the dreaded sea!*
- It is interesting to observe how Jesus responds *positively* when the *unclean* demons *twice* beg him for something. And *yet*, when the *newly-healed* man begs to stay *with him*, Jesus responds *negatively!* This helps us discern one of Luke's main themes. When Jesus tells the *healed-man* to *return home* instead of following him, *Jesus also asks the man to tell others how much God has done for him*. Obediently, the man goes back to his Gentile community. But, he proclaims *how much Jesus* has done for him.

- By reading this story in its wider context, in the middle of *three interrelated stories* in Luke, chapter 8, we can see how *subtly* Luke makes his point.⁴ The three stories in Luke 8 involve *the stilling of the storm*; the *expulsion of a demon*; and a *healing and a raising from the dead*. This is significant. For, in the Scriptures, Israel's God was known to have power over three things: *over the sea* and the forces of nature; *over evil* and the demonic realm; as well as the *power to restore life* to what has died,⁵ the very themes present in Luke's *three stories*. With these stories, Luke therefore shows *how* –in the mission of Jesus– *the very same forms of God's power are at work*. And *directly after this*, *Jesus then* shares his power with the twelve, whom he then sends out in mission.⁶
- Our Gospel story today is about how, in Jesus, God's ultimate power and authority has sovereignty over *differing cultures*, and over *all of nature*. Yet, this universal claim raises two potentially difficult questions: What do we make of *God's highly particular regard for Israel and the Jews*, as well as for *Jesus*? And, what do we make of the *irreducible uniqueness and dignity of every human person*, even one who is tormented by the 'legion' of demons?⁷
- And, how can we *prayerfully* and *thoughtfully* consider these questions, in our highly polarized and contentious world? Because the reality of *God's regard for the uniqueness of the Jews and of Jesus*, and *God's regard for the uniqueness of every person* are *both under attack every day*. This assault happens in the world of ideas and conversation, and on far-away battlefields as well as on our own streets. So we should give sustained thought and reflective prayer to these deep and searching questions, which are posed by our Scriptures.
- About them, we have little time to do more than *name three abiding facts*. *First: God loves, and has always loved, the people of his first Covenant*.

Second: God loves those who respond to his historical and revealed initiatives, and who by grace are grafted into the historical community of Israel. And, *third*, God loves **ALL** people, irrespective of our sins, our limited world-views, and our antipathy toward those who differ from us. This is why our heavenly Father *lovingly* invites **all** people to respond to his Spirit **with divine love**.

- Our Prayer Book has a fitting prayer of thanksgiving for the world's diversity of races and cultures: "O God, who created all peoples in your image, we thank you for the wonderful diversity of races and cultures in this world. Enrich our lives by ever-widening circles of fellowship, and **show us your presence in those who differ most from us, until our knowledge of your love is made perfect in our love for all your children... Amen.**"⁸



Christ Healing the Possessed of Gerasa (Magdeburg Cathedral, Byzantine, c.968)

Luke 5:21-43

Jesus and his disciples arrived at the country of the Gerasenes, which is opposite Galilee. 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. 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" -- [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.) Jesus then asked him, "[What is your name?](#)" He said, "[Legion](#)"; [for many demons had entered him. They begged him not to order them to go back into the abyss](#).

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. 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.

When the swineherds saw what had happened, they ran off and told it in the city and in the country. 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. Those who had seen it told them how the one who had been possessed by demons had been healed. 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. The man from whom the demons had gone begged that he might be with him; but Jesus sent him away, saying, "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.

Notes:

¹ Tom Wright, *Luke for Everyone* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), p. 101.

² See Genesis 1; Genesis 7-8; Exodus 14; Joshua 3; Jonah Psalm 74; and Revelation 12-13.

³ Luke 8:22-25.

⁴ See Luke 8:22-25; 8:26-39; and 8:40-56.

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⁵ The power to shape history and human events is clearly an additional power attributed to the God of Israel in the Scriptures. It is noteworthy that, though he embodied the other mentioned powers, Jesus generally responds to the course of human events, rather than alter them through supernatural power. {The power to shape history appears to be the most carefully guarded of divine powers, and the one most fully coveted by ungodly human minds}

⁶ See Luke 9:1–2: “Jesus called the twelve together and gave them power and authority over all demons and to cure diseases, and he sent them out to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal.”

⁷ A compact and accessible reflection on the significance of these two questions can be found in Peter Kreeft’s online audio talk, “Lost in the Cosmos,” which can be accessed here: http://www.peterkreeft.com/audio/13_lost-in-the-cosmos.htm

⁸ *The Book of Common Prayer*, p. 840.