



# “Demons and Devils? ... Really?”

Text: Mark 5:1-20

*a sermon by Kevin Fleming*

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FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH - EVANSVILLE, INDIANA

The story that Mark offers us on this Sunday morning is troublesome. We're dealing with an exorcism and that is troubling territory for proper Presbyterians. We have far less trouble with healing stories. After all, we have known those who were ill and were made well - albeit most usually at the hands of medical professionals. Healing stories are far more palatable to us, because we are sophisticated enough to know that demons and devils are not the cause of sickness and disease - physical and mental. We are perfectly content with blaming viruses and bacteria, environmental conditions, and even unknown causes for illnesses and disease.

But, demons and devils? Really? Are we really being asked to accept the pre-scientific worldview of 1<sup>st</sup> century people? Are we supposed to buy the perspective that the embodiment - the anthropomorphic notion that evil is personified - is the cause of this poor man's brokenness?

That was the line of questioning and incredulity with which I approached this story. I am the product of the modern and post-modern eras. Demons and devils? Really? What am I - what are we - to do with this story?

Perhaps we need to begin by allowing Mark to tell his story in the way he knows how to tell it. We find Jesus - not at home in Israel - but beyond Israel - out on the margins. Jesus is among the cities of the Decapolis. The Decapolis was a group of ten cities on the eastern frontier of the Roman Empire in the first centuries BC and AD. They formed a group because of their language, culture, location, and political status, with each functioning as an autonomous city-state dependent on Rome. The Decapolis was the center of Greek and Roman culture in a region which was otherwise populated by Semitic-speaking people and, as such, were perceived as ten, equally profane, cities by those who surrounded them.

Jesus has gone to work “outside the bounds,” as we Presbyterians would say, and we are not made aware that anyone sanctioned his work beyond his own people. He has gone out among the Gentiles and such interactions had restrictions, including the risk of whoever went among the Gentiles becoming labeled as “unclean.”

Jesus was in the region of the Gerasenes, where he was met by a man, who lived among tombs, and was possessed of an unclean spirit. Don't freak out - yet. There are a couple of problems confronting Jesus. First, there is the Levitical injunction that if one comes in contact with a corpse, that one is defiled. Add to that, that the Prophet Isaiah condemns those “who sit inside tombs, and spend the night in secret places; who eat swine's flesh...” (Isaiah 65:4). We are told that there is a herd of pigs nearby. “We aren't in Kansas - or even Missouri - or Israel anymore.” We are way out on the margins.

This man that confronts Jesus is possessed of an “unclean spirit.” We don't know exactly what that means. The description implies that he has been cast out by his family and friends, who do not know what to do with him. He has been physically restrained, but has snapped the chains and restraints with what must have seemed super human strength. He howled like a wolf and cut and bruised himself as he ran among the graves. The dude was seriously messed up. He lived among those who were considered, by some, to be evil. And the evil people had cast him out because he was even too evil for them. This man lived on the margin of the margin.

Now, if you want to do a forensic psychological analysis of this man's case and condition, open your DSM and have at it. Was he mentally ill? Quite possibly, but that is not the point. The reality is that evil exists in the world and when people are marinated in it, catastrophic things happen. This man from Gerasene was seemingly completely beyond help and hope, bound and constrained by a force and a situation from which he could not free himself, and enslaved to a life from which no one could liberate him.

And then Jesus comes along. Jesus comes along and sets the man free. The demons are cast out from the cast out, the pigs rush down the hill and off the edge so fast that the swine flew, the man seeks to become a disciple, Jesus tells him to tell his story to those in his town, the townspeople come out and beg Jesus to leave. That's about three other sermons, which I am not going to preach this morning.

I am most captivated by the image of the cast out among the marginalized and Jesus' response. It is that aspect of the story I invite you to consider with me this morning.

This man was not like other people. What we can only call “evil” had surrounded and infilled the man. The systems of the Roman Empire’s world had failed him. His family system had failed him. His circle of friends had failed him. Any semblance of a reflection of how God created this world to be was absent from this man’s existence. Any trace of basic human worth did not exist for this man. Any minuscule drop of compassion was missing from this man’s life. Any form of justice was non-existent in this man’s life.

And it is this very man - from the margins of the margins - that Jesus engaged. Jesus still sees the image of God behind the bruises and contusions the man bears. Jesus sees a community that waits to welcome beyond the man’s isolation and friendlessness. Jesus sees a child of God of inestimable worth. Jesus sees a human being in need of compassion, understanding, and intervention. Jesus sees something that the empire of Caesar could not see, but which was as plain as day in the Empire of God.

Jesus condemns the evil. Jesus confronts the evil. Jesus casts out the evil. Jesus brings wholeness where there was brokenness. Jesus brings hope where there was desperation. Jesus brings community and the warm embrace of others. Jesus brings life in a place where death surrounded. Jesus brings restoration and remaking to one who had been bound to the margins of life.

And that, of course, is what Jesus calls his disciples to do as well. Jesus sends out his disciples, Mark tells us, and gives them the power to force out evil spirits and to heal every kind of disease and sickness. (Mark 10:1)

That has not changed. Jesus still sends out his disciples in 2020 to confront evil, to liberate those in bondage, to restore those who without hope, to implement change in the Empire of Caesar with the life-giving reality of the Empire of God.

Who are the people who live on the margins of the margins?

The person who will spend the night in their car, or under the bridge over Pigeon Creek.

The grandmother who is raising a grandchild on her Social Security check and hopes to be able to live long enough to see that child to independence.

The teenager who came out as LGBTQIA and was thrown out of the family and surfs from couch to couch every night.

Who are the people who live on the margins of the margins?

The black skinned teenager who has done nothing wrong but is pulled over for a baseless traffic violation.

The child with an individual educational plan - an IPE - who receives glorified baby-sitting in school rather than an education.

The developmentally challenged young person who is looked down on, or, even worse, is invisible to the person buying groceries yet is bagging those groceries and earning a living.

Who are the people who live on the margins of the margins?

The poor who can no longer afford to rent a modest home in  
Evansville because of gentrification and over-priced condos for  
the well-off.

The single mother who is forced to work 2 or 3 jobs to provide for  
her children.

The family that cowers within their home as the gunfire echoes  
down their street.

These are the people - and so very many others with them - who are  
ignored and disempowered by the evils of the Empire of Caesar. They  
are in bondage to forces beyond their control. They need someone to  
come alongside and take on the evil with them.

And that is why you and I are here. In Jesus Christ, God has called  
and commissioned us to move beyond our actions of mercy and  
immediate help, to the work of changing the systems that push some of  
our fellow human beings to the margins of the margins. You and I are  
called to do the work of justice, because, as Cornell West reminds us,  
“justice is what love looks like in public.” You and I are called to work  
until that day when “justice rolls down like waters, and righteousness like  
a raging stream.” You and I are called to the life-giving, life-restoring  
work of justice, “though this world with devils filled should threaten to  
undo us.”

Let us confront the evil that surrounds. Let us cast out the forces,  
eternally opposed to God, that bind and destroy. Let us send out the  
evil that stalks in darkness and destroys at noon.

Let us do what our Lord commissions us to do.

Let us do justice and bring life to all.

Let us be the church.

Demons and devils? Really?

Not for long.

Not for now nor evermore. Amen.



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