

“Before We Pig Out”
Presbyterian Church in Leonia
June 23, 2019
Rev. Dr. Leah Fowler

Psalm 42
Luke 8:26-39

Where we end the gospel story, there are a bunch of very angry pig farmers running Jesus and his disciples out of town. You can understand why they would be angry: Jesus just sent an army of demons into their herd, causing them to run off a cliff, and into the lake, where they drowned. I guess there would be no hot dogs at the annual picnic for the Gerasenes.

You may remember that this is the Year of the Pig, according to the Chinese Zodiac. The pig-- or wild boar, some would clarify, might find overall good fortune, wealth, honesty, general prosperity. The sign symbolizes a hard working, peace-loving person, who is truthful, generous, indulgent, patient, reliable, trusting, sincere, giving, and sociable, with a large sense of humour and understanding.

Are there any church people who are Year of the Pig at church today? These sound like people you would enjoy being around at a picnic, right?

But before we pig out, we should take note that this story is not told from a Chinese perspective, but of a Jewish one. And to Jews, pigs were considered forbidden foods. On the day that Jesus crossed the Sea of Galilee to the land of the Geresenes, there would be no pig feast, for many reasons.

Luke says that Jesus set sail, across the Sea of Galilee, from Galilee into the country of the Gerasenes. Even though the Sea of Galilee is really just a big lake, it seems that from one side to the other people eat and talk just a little bit different. The truth is, we do not have to go very far from where we live right now to find cultures that are vastly different from one another.

It is amazing what you can get comfortable with when you live near it. The man who lived in the country of the Gerasenes was clearly sick and in anguish. He lived in a graveyard, among the tombs. He walked around naked everywhere he went. His feet trailed broken chains behind him everywhere he went. These were the chains people had bound him in when they thought they could quiet him and control him by locking

him up; but somehow, he always managed to break free. Mark's gospel reports that the man would howl and bruise himself with stones.

But it is amazing what you can get comfortable with. It seemed that the local people, the Gerasenes, had accepted this odd man's rantings, even though he was clearly suffering, for Luke reports that this man had lived-- if you could call it living-- like this "for a long time." True, they did try to capture him, but he kept busting out. So, instead they made him a fixture in their routine lives while still trying to avoid him as much as possible: "Oh, don't mind him. He's just our local howling naked guy. He passes through these parts going back and forth from the tombs to the wilds."

When Jesus arrived on the shores of the country of the Gerasenes, this is the first man Luke announces he sees. I imagine this man, who remained nameless in scripture, groaning or moaning, maybe even howling, as his body shook and he called out words everyone else assumed were nonsense. Now I have to tell you, there was a time when I was living internationally and I saw a naked man, who was clearly not in his right mind, walking right toward *me*. It was terrifying, and I tried to make myself invisible as I walked quickly and glazed my stare, because we were in a narrow alleyway, and I decided it would be safer to pass him into the nearby crowded streets than to turn my back to him.

But Jesus was not afraid-- and I am sure in that moment, his gender identity helped him feel safe. He commanded the unclean spirit to come out of the man, who then fell to his knees and cried out to Jesus, "What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I beg you, do not torment me"

"What is your name?" Jesus asked him. It's not clear if Jesus asked the man himself, or if Jesus asked the demon within him. Regardless, it is the demon who responds. "Legion," he said, for many demons had entered him.

Writing from a postcolonial perspective, biblical scholar Jin Young Choi notes the linkage between this man's demons and of the occupying presence of the Roman military in the surrounding regions. "The name 'Legion' has a double meaning. Literally, it means, 'Many thousands, multitudes.' But it also alludes to the occupying Roman soldier legions which numbered 3,000 to 6,000 each. Many Israelites felt the Roman legions were another form of demonic occupation."¹

¹ David Ewart, "Understanding the Bible in its own time and in ours, Luke 8:26-39" 2013

What would you say, if Jesus asked your demons, "What is your name?"

Perhaps you bear some resemblance to the Gerasene man, coming from a place that has been occupied by country after country after country, so many layers that it is hard to know what identity is really you, and what identity has been pushed upon you by someone else.

Maybe your demon is a trauma you experienced in the past, or as a child. As for me, fear is the demon that is most likely to keep me up at night, wandering some place between the tombs and the wilds of my mind. I admit this, even knowing that my fears are mostly the product of my very imaginative mind. But some people living in this country deal with fears much more real: like a raid by ICE that will split apart your family and diminish the dreams of the life you could build here, or the fears of what will be come of your child taken from you at the border, sent to live in an overcrowded detention facility where there is no toilet paper or toothbrushes, and more important than that there is no parent to cradle your child when he cries in the night, or to protect her if she becomes sick or hurt. This cruelty is a demon that has occupied our country. We as Christians must remember the baptismal vows we make to our own children when we promise to love them and to nurture them in Christian care. Those practices must extend beyond our sanctuary to reflect in the lives of any children, knowing that in Jesus' words, it is better to have a millstone tied to your neck than to allow any of these little ones to stumble.

No matter who your demon is, or who your demons are, I urge you not to get as comfortable with them among you as the people of Gerasene. Be uncomfortable with the headlines, but only ignore them as much as your health can require. Try to get to know your personal demons too. Ask its name. Recognize its strangeness as something that does not have to be part of you. Do not be afraid of what you can become without it taking up space inside of you and leading *you* to dwell among the tombs.

You see, when Jesus healed this man of his demons, he showed up, sitting at Jesus' feet, and he was clothed and he was in his right mind-- this man, whom they had been watching-- at a distance-- for years and years. What did they do? They did not throw a party that this lost man had been found. They did not stand in reverence to Jesus who did this. No! Instead, they were *afraid*. Not just plain scared, the scripture says, but *seized* with fear.

Like I said earlier, it is amazing what you grow to become comfortable with-- even when it is denying you life. When I was living in Chicago, I went through a period of very high stress. One day, I was at my physician's office for an annual check-up. I told her about my stress, and my doctor-- she was a Korean American woman who practiced acupuncture as well as Western medicine-- said, "Let me stick a few pins in you." Thirty minutes later I left her office and went about my regular business. But when I got home, I fell into the deepest, most relaxing sleep on the living room sofa-- even though it was only 6 pm. Several hours later, I awoke, and it felt like I had to drag my body from layers of heavy sand just to make it up the stairs. And that alarmed me. I thought, surely there must be something wrong with me if my body is not responding as quickly as my brain is telling it to!" And immediately, my stress level returned to its earlier level. My doctor had given me a gift, allowing me to trade my stress for deep relaxation. But it was a gift I was not yet ready to receive, because it meant I had to let my demon of stress go. I clung to it tightly, because it had become such a familiar enemy that it posed as my friend.

Perhaps in a similar way, the Gerasene people had grown to be more comfortable with this man's lonely, howling, naked walks from the tombs to the wilds, even when he walked through their own living space, than they felt when he was healed, restored, clothed, and among them-- in the land of the living, not the tombs of the dead. I wonder why that is?

Well, by now we know that there were some furious pig farmers. When Jesus called out those demons, he sent them right into a herd of pigs, who then marched straight off a cliff and into the lake, where they drowned! So, we know that Jesus' healing of this man upset some part of the local economy. Maybe the people were wondering how this pig farmers' loss will ripple out to all their small businesses.

But I think it was more than that. I believe that this man's presence among them was a constant reminder to these people that they also had their demons-- maybe demons they could conceal and clothe better, but demons nonetheless. Just as they had grown comfortable with the howling, naked man, they also had grown comfortable with their own demons. But watching this man's life get changed, perhaps they realized they could change too. And they just weren't ready to let go of what felt familiar and comfortable, even if it was denying them fullness of life.

This story-- which gets repeated in Matthew and Mark as well as Luke-- invites us to be honest, with Jesus and with ourselves, as well as with our communities, to name what it

is that keeps us from fullness of life, and keeps us from sharing that fullness of life with others. Answering the question with honesty may indeed frighten us. Seeing what God can do in us and through us is frightening, indeed. But it is also wonderful and amazing, and it can change us.