

26Then they arrived at the country of the Gerasenes, which is opposite Galilee. 27As 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. 28When 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”— 29for 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.) 30Jesus then asked him, “What is your name?” He said, “Legion,” for many demons had entered him. 31They begged him not to order them to go back into the abyss. 32Now 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. 33Then 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. 34When the swineherds saw what had happened, they ran off and told it in the city and in the country. 35Then 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. 36Those who had seen it told them how the one who had been possessed by demons had been healed. 37Then 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. 38The man from whom the demons had gone begged that he might be with him; but Jesus sent him away, saying, 39“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.

Jesus is continuing his journey from town to town proclaiming the forgiveness of sins, not without interruption, such as the widow burying her son, and just before this story, Jesus had to calm a life-threatening storm, which had terrified the disciples. He arrives on the other side of the lake. From there he went to the region of the Gerasenes, which is his first visit in Luke’s gospel to gentile, non-Jewish territory. He is out of his comfort zone; he is no longer working among the Jewish people, his people. And even though he had had some trouble in Galilee, it was home. Many of us feel a bit disoriented when we enter new situations. I know I do. Sometimes I seem to be quiet and a bit standoffish. But the truth is, I am shy until I get comfortable in a situation. As someone here said to me at first, we couldn’t get you to say anything, and now we can’t get you to shut up. In new situations, I can still fall back into those old patterns I am trying to break. Maybe you can teach an old dog new tricks.

Well, Jesus is away from his home base, and before he can get settled and oriented, he is met with another powerful interruption, a screaming, wild-eyed, naked man infested with unclean spirits. He has been run out of town and lives in a cemetery. He is a danger to both himself and others. They try to keep him chained up in this cemetery, probably a series of caves, but he keeps breaking his chains. This location reiterates his ritual uncleanness, as cemeteries were considered unclean. So, he is isolated from family and society as one to be avoided—an unclean man in an unclean location possessed by unclean spirits.

Except for the people who try to care for him, who bring him food and the like, he is out of sight and out of mind, just like the townsfolk like it.

The person possessed by demons confronts Jesus, and he knows something the disciples don’t.

The disciples at the end of the previous story, the calming of the storm, said, “Who is this, who even the wind and water obey?” They don’t know who Jesus really is. But the demon-infested man does. He calls Jesus the Son of the Most High God. He begs Jesus not to torment him.

Jesus asks, “What is your name?” The spirit replies, “Legion,” indicating a large number of demons had entered this man. The demons beg as well, imploring Jesus not to send them back into the abyss from which they came. Some people don’t like or believe in demons or unclean spirits; most of the time, I do. But even if you don’t believe in them, you can still see them as an image for all the modern issues that attack people, as Judith Jones says,” How

many people in our world are haunted by a traumatic past and tortured by memories? How many live unsheltered and inadequately clothed because of social and economic forces that they cannot overcome, no matter how hard they struggle? How many are imprisoned, regarded as barely human, excluded, cast out? How many are enslaved by addictions, no longer knowing where the addiction ends, and their own selves begin? Where do the governing authorities separate people from their families, denying them the opportunity to seek better lives? Where do occupying armies still brutalize entire communities and hold them captive to fear?"

These problems are on our block, in our community, and all around our world. They are evil, demonic, and destroy life.

Maybe our issues aren't as extreme, or perhaps they are. Still, we may have tried to convince ourselves that we can control our issues, or we must live with them, but all the while, they cause self-destructive behavior in us and those we love. The victims feel trapped in that condition. These demons separate the people from everyday life within the family and from others. Sound familiar? Do we know people like this?

Jesus granted the demon's begging request to be cast into a herd of pigs. The pigs that Jews consider unclean are to be the demons' new home, at least for a second. The pigs are so startled by the demons that they jump into a lake and drown, and with them the demons. Now I don't like the death of the pigs and don't know what to make of it, except that it continues the theme of uncleanness, a recurring theme in this passage. Unclean Spirits have entered an unclean gentile, in an unclean cemetery in an unclean territory, and then the unclean swine receive the legion of demons. Legion is gone, but as we will see later, one or two are still lurking around.

With the repetition of the idea of unclean, it is easy to get the impression that Jesus was in some unclean God forsaken place, full of demons, pigs, corpses, and gentiles. Still, the truth is that no person or place is God forsaken, even when we feel it is or think we are. I believe that is why he went to this new area beyond his home and showed people beyond his tribe that no one is beyond the reach of God. Not the people of Israel, not the Gentiles, not the man with unclean spirits, not the people up street, not you, and not me. No one is God forsaken.

Remember what the voice from heaven said to Peter, "Never consider unclean what God has made pure." Act 10:15 - Through Jesus, God has made us all pure, and Jesus is calling us to be rid of our own demons and help others cast out theirs.

In our story, the man is healed and set free; he is dressed, coherent, and the costly uncleanness is gone; the man is now clean. He is nothing like the violent, wild-eyed man Jesus encountered as he arrived. Salvation and healing have come to this man.

You'd think there would be great joy with this healing. But not everyone is happy when someone is healed, not now, not then. Some people cling to their demons because they know them and worry about what life would be like without them. A book called *Rough Sleepers*, that Christine gave me, is the story of street people, and the efforts to minister to them by Dr. Jim O'Connell. Even with the successes they achieve, many refuse to give up the life on the streets filled with homelessness, alcohol, and drugs. Even though they know how horrible it is, they are not willing or able to give it up for something uncertain; they fear change.

Sometimes this unwillingness to give something up strikes close to home, and those we love have lost hope and see themselves as stuck forever. Our problems can distort our awareness of the availability of healing. And the demon named "I can't change" haunts them.

Jesus came to claim us as his and challenge anything that holds us down and robs us of life, like the demons that prey on us. But now it is you and I as followers of Jesus, who must seek to bring wholeness and healing to hurting people in his name. But we are not alone in this task. We have allies. Jesus uses believers and non-believers as healers as well as believers. Jesus uses priests, pastors, rabbis, imams, and other spiritual leaders, as well as churches, caring therapists, doctors, AA, trauma specialists, all kinds of support groups, friends, and companion animals, to name a few. And often they don't even know Jesus is using them.

Now there is another demon hanging around with “You can’t change”. It is the demon fear. Fear is one of our greatest enemies. That is why “fear not” is such a common Biblical expression. It is a word God speaks to us in all kinds of situations because the demon fear is so powerful. “Fear not” is a word from God to us. We need to stop letting the demon fear make us give up hope.

It's hard because sometimes, we must be willing to give up something or some things that we fear we can do without. Things that, however painful, we know about, and maybe we can't get over fear alone, but there are people and groups, like our allies, that can help us, because it can be hard and frightening to give up something or someone when it feels like we have an unbreakable chain around us. Many of us are bound in some way or know someone who is.

To help us break those chains of fear, he says to us, “Fear not.”

Because of this fear, Jesus is confronted by the townspeople, who the swine herds told about the event. The people are upset at the loss of the pigs; naturally, it was someone's livelihood, but even more, there is an unpredictable itinerant outsider who is a prophetic miracle worker, stirring things up. They did not want a holy man disrupting the status quo any more than he already had and putting their well-ordered lives at risk. We, too, understand that Jesus can often disrupt what is essential to us, but when he does, it is with something more important.

From all these powerful and spirit-crushing chains of uncleanness, the man is now free. Salvation and healing have come to him. But the man is not done.

The man begs Jesus to let him join the disciples and travel with him. But Jesus declines the offer, for he has different plans for him. He sends him home. He restores him to his friends, family, and community. No longer is he unclean; no longer an outcast, he belongs, he has a home, family, and community, some things that are so special yet taken for granted by many of us.

Jesus also gives him a vital task; he is to tell the townsfolk what God has done for him, making him an evangelist. And that is something we are all called to be and do. So off to the city to tell people what Jesus has done for him. That is the same thing Jesus calls us to do.

I have a favor to ask you. I would like you to try something between now and after the music for meditation. Think of something God has done for you that you would feel comfortable sharing, and then, when the music is over, tell someone sitting near you what God has done for you.