

Read dramatically:

And out the demons came – from every cave and crevice, through every fissure and crack, from under the rocks and up from the mud, stomping and shuffling, slithering and sliding, through the murky shadows. And all had only one thought in mind: destroy the intruders and protect Ignorance.

This is an excerpt from Norton Juster’s novel from 1961, *The Phantom Tollbooth*, in the chapter titled “The Unwelcoming Committee.” I just finished my first reading of this book. I was struck at how relevant Juster’s parable is 63 years on. This sermon will not serve as a book review. However, if you have eyes to see, and ears to hear, I suggest you pick it up. It is an easy read with plenty of layers worth unpacking.

“The Unwelcoming Committee” is on point with today’s reading from the gospel of Mark.

Last week, we read that Jesus taught from a boat, then embarked with his disciples on a perilous journey across the Sea of Galilee. In this instance

the sea serves as a metaphor for the chaos of life, and the question arises about how well our faith will handle such challenges. Jesus' disciples realized that they weren't quite ready for Prime Time.

What they weren't aware of, was that once they reached the other side they were going to receive a master class in who Jesus is and the impact Jesus can have on those unhealthy forces that hold us captive, and upon release of them, free us to live in our "right" minds. I'll explain.

Keep in mind, these stories about "the disciples" are clearly targeted at anyone who would choose to follow Jesus. They are not subjects we can blithely observe from afar; they are us.

That's right. Jesus told the disciples that they had to cross to "the other side" of the lake. The "other side" meant leaving their comfort zone. The "other side" meant being in the company of Gentiles, the "unclean," the "other." As experiences with Jesus tend to happen, there would be no easing into their discomfort.

Upon arriving on “the other side,” they are indeed greeted by “an unwelcome committee.” Well, a committee of one who is possessed by many. It is said that the man had “an unclean spirit.” So as not to draw this sermon out more than necessary, let’s say that Mark has packed this “man” full of symbolism that we can apply to our own times using more contemporary language.

It is possible that the person was suffering from a mental health crisis; one strong enough that the community wasn’t equipped to deal with him – so they did what communities tend to do, they tried to lock him up and stigmatized him. We have no clues about his life to this point, so we cannot judge his mental health.

In our day, we are also aware that traumatic events in life can cause us to turn inward, not feeling equipped with the intensity of the pain. This person’s self-harm (using rocks to beat and cut himself) is a relatable symptom to many who injure themselves in any number of ways in order to cope with internal pain. In our bible study on Thursday, we debated the question, “Who is speaking to Jesus? Is it the person themselves or the demon within?” Some said “a,” some said, “b,” and some said, well,

“other.” How easy is it to parse the voices that come from us from what is “us” and what “possesses” us?

Jesus’ interaction with this person invites us to ask some very deep questions.

Clearly, Mark is trying to point to a destructive force within the person that Jesus is able to address.

The gospel writer invites us to peel back a couple more layers from this parable, when they decided to use the term “Legion” as the name for the demon. At the time, it was quite well known that a legion was a unit of Roman soldiers; 1000 in a company. It is no mistake, then, that when Legion is drawn from the person it occupies 2000 pigs. For Jews, pigs were unclean; Romans were unclean. This side of the lake was littered with Roman soldiers - the “occupation” of the community by the Romans, everpresent. When the occupied pigs run into the sea and are drowned, a metaphorical connection is made with the Egyptians who died in the Red Sea pursuing the fleeing Israelites from their captivity

under Pharaoh. In Mark, we've already seen Jesus compared to the prophet Elijah, now he is exercising the same type of power as the Jewish superhero, Moses. (That connection will be made more explicit four chapters from now at the Transfiguration.)

First the wind and the waves calmed upon Jesus' command. And now demons. As Jim Christensen said on Thursday, "First the natural forces, now the supernatural forces, obey Jesus." The disciples are receiving quite the education regarding the absolute power of Jesus! So, if the disciples ought to be paying attention, then who else? (US!)

You would think that the community would have been thrilled that Jesus exercised this demon from their midst! Right? Liberation of what occupies us and oppresses us ought to be cause for celebration. But that's not what happens in the next part of this story.

Why are there pigs? Other than carrying the Legion demon into the sea, pigs were also a source of revenue for the local farmers. With all those

Roman soldiers around, there were a lot of eager mouths to feed! When the pork went belly-up in the sea, so did the livelihoods of the swineherds. Those with an eye on the wellbeing of the local economy were not happy. That's on the surface level of the story.

Probing deeper, if the possessed man was a symbol for a region occupied by outside forces, then anything having to do with getting rid of said forces was sedition. And the community members clearly did not want to make waves with the Romans - so they insisted that Jesus leave.

As Chris Weaver pointed out in bible study, "The people would rather be subjugated than to be free." As long as they were allowed to get along and mind their own business, they would keep their heads down when it came to the Romans. If Jesus wanted to break the system of oppression, he needed to do it somewhere else. If they must bend to the Pax Romana, so be it, they were fine. The Legion who had possessed the man was a symbol of the Roman occupation. So Jesus is trying to help them see that they are not, in fact, fine. In healing the demoniac, he seems to be telling them, "Unless you are willing to face what you ignore, your ignorance will possess and plague you." Sadly, it was the one they tried so hard to

distance themselves from who actually showed them the way to their release.

Speaking of the person who was freed from the demons, they are the only one in this story to truly come out whole “on the other side.” When the townspeople wanted to see for themselves that he was, in fact, well, they came and saw. And while this show of Jesus’ power overwhelmed *them* with fear, it made a true believer out of the one who was made whole. And this is where Mark wants to shine the spotlight.

Throughout much of the Gospel of Mark, Jesus performs miracles, but admonishes demons, disciples, and witnesses not to tell anyone about them. However, in this story, Jesus does the opposite. Upon being healed, the man begs to join Jesus as Jesus’ traveling party prepares to embark on their journey back across the sea. {That sure was a quick trip!}

“Son of God,” he pleads, “let me stay with you!”

Who could blame him? After all he’d been through, why wouldn’t he want to continue to be with the one

who could see him,
who freed him from his internal demons,
who allowed him to live again?

*Isn't that the tendency of us all - to have our Savior within reach at all
times?*

But Jesus wouldn't allow it. Just as he forcefully told the disciples that, with faith, they could have handled the stormy sea on their own, he tells this one that there is important work to be done right there where he lives. Jesus encourages them to "Go home to your own people, and tell them how much God has done for you and what mercy God has shown you." And Jesus didn't have to say it twice. For the healed one knew they were empowered to do what this One of God has bid them to do. And what could stop them from doing so? They'd already overcome the most terrifying of forces, and lived to tell about it...*lived to tell about it!* And they did so, far and wide...with freedom and in joy.

In all those who believe the testimony of the one transformed, the next time Jesus crosses to the other side, he will find a much more welcoming committee to meet him.

One of the commentaries I read on this story stressed the point that the former demoniac had become “a new man.” I disagree. It’s the same man; his community members recognize him. However, he is someone who endured, and now, has a new lease on life. Thanks to Jesus, he bears his own agency. That is powerful!

My friends, “The Other Side” is what happens when Jesus heals us. Like the one in the story, we have a sense of true authority, and we no longer need to be afraid of any powers and principalities – for, in Christ Jesus, we are “possessed” with a power that supersedes human powers and structures.

The power of this kind of testimony is critical to the sharing of the gospel. There are many examples throughout hymnody that express the

liberationist power of the gospel. The African-American spiritual “Steal Away” comes to mind:

Steal away, steal away, steal away to Jesus.

Steal away—steal away home.

‘Fore I ain’t got long to stay here.

Another powerful hymn is the adaptation of Psalm 46 composed by the Reformer Martin Luther, in 1529. A few verses of the psalm read,

1 God is our refuge and strength,
a very present help in trouble.

2 Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change,
though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea,

3 though its waters roar and foam,
though the mountains tremble with its tumult. ...

10 “Be still, and know that I am God!
I am exalted among the nations;
I am exalted in the earth.”

11 God-of-Angel-Armies is with us.

Let’s join our voices to sing Luther’s take on this powerful statement of faith.