

**The Reverend Jon Hauerwaas - June 23, 2019 -  
“Like He Was Overrun by an Army”  
Selected Verses from Psalm 42 and 43 and Luke 8:26-39**

In our second lesson this morning, Jesus is in a foreign land. We know that he's among the gentiles when pigs, ritually unclean animals, are mentioned. And here, in the land of the Gerasenes, Jesus' first encounter is with a man whose life has been filled with suffering. Whose days have been punctuated with outbursts and violence. Whose every phase in the journey has been acquainted with destruction. This man has inflicted incredible harm upon his family and his neighbors, and all of the resources that might set his life on a new course have been exhausted.

Now, he is cast out and discarded. Living on the outskirts of the village, beyond the protective wall or gate, he is chained amid the tombs. And yet, as unsettling as this passage is, we can also understand how things progressed to this point. Just imagine what we long for today. Among these are safety, security, and peace in our communities.

Ancient people were no different. But, in the days before science, medicine, brain research, and psychology, our ancestors had few options for

addressing serious mental health issues. Those displaying antisocial behaviors could be corrected, verbally; punished, physically; or forcibly imprisoned. In extreme examples, deviant behavior might result in excommunication or, even, execution. This man has likely endured all of this. The only thing left is death. And yet, as we find him, alone and confined to the tombs, he is as close to death as it gets.

In Western civilization, when criminologists speak about the aims of the modern justice system, they're talking, primarily, about four things. First, there's deterrence. This is, if you're thinking about breaking society's rules, then you might want to reconsider because there will be an unpleasant consequence in response to your behavior. Second, there's retribution. This means that whenever someone has wronged another, the offender ought to be punished to restore order.

Third is incapacitation. This means that an offender is removed from society and locked up to prevent that individual from harming anyone else. And, finally, there's rehabilitation, which involves looking beyond incarceration to one's reintroduction to society. With this goal in mind, an

offender might study a subject or learn a particular skill that can be useful to the greater society.

In Luke's Gospel, I imagine that many of these aims have already been pursued. And now, there is a rather basic desire to simply incapacitate this guy. He's so unpredictable and he's hurt so many people that he's now chained in an effort to restrict his movement and his freedom. Held in isolation, the harm that he causes will be kept to a minimum.

Yet, the conditions in which he now lives are horrific. His body is bloodied and bruised. His hair and beard are matted. He is covered with bugs. Lacking the knowledge of and access to the psychotic medications he desperately needs, and having endured a lengthy period of solitary confinement, the prisoner's mental health is in freefall.

It is here that Jesus enters. Upon arriving in the land of the Garasenes, the first person that he encounters is the so-called demoniac. Jesus quickly recognizes the dire nature of this man's fate. And as he considers the many layers of complexity and dysfunction in this man's life, he enters into relationship with him. Jesus acknowledges the man's humanity. He engages

him in conversation. And he offers him the compassionate ministry of presence and healing.

Friends, have you ever been freed from a burden? Has anyone ever put their arm around you and told you that everything was going to be okay? Has another person ever freed you from a debt that you were carrying, whether that debt was financial or something else entirely? Has anyone ever told you that they forgive you, even though your mistake was so egregious that you wouldn't have blamed them for walking away? Or, in the depths of despair, have you ever cried out to God for mercy because you wanted to feel whole again?

That's what this passage is about. It's about restoration. It's about God showing up when others have given up on us and, even, when we've given up on ourselves. Freed from his torment and in his right mind, the newly restored man asks to follow Jesus. But, Jesus urges him to remain in his homeland because he has an urgent mission for this new disciple. He is to go and to tell his neighbors all that has happened to him. And, as he goes, the man who was formerly chained and living in the tombs becomes the first gentile convert to share the good news of Jesus Christ among the Garasenes.

As I draw to a close this morning, I want you to understand that there is more to this passage than individual conversion and evangelism. As Evan Garner reminds us, in the year 66 AD, “The Roman army brutalized the people of Garasa as part of its campaign against the Jewish rebels during the First Jewish-Roman War. A legendary legion of 5,000 soldiers would have been (excessive), but a smaller cohort may have been responsible for the Garasene slaughter.”<sup>1</sup>

“Regardless, Luke’s readers must have recognized that the demon’s name, Legion, represented an association between demonic possession and brutal military occupation. Here, Jesus reveals his power not only over the demons but also over the empires of this world.”<sup>2</sup>

And yet, the connection of this narrative with Rome “makes this Gospel story even more troubling for the reader. After Jesus breaks the bonds of oppression, the townspeople ask him to leave - revealing a preference for the shackles of empire over the freedom of God’s reign.”<sup>3</sup> And it is here, in their response, that we find hints of our own temptation “to maintain our

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<sup>1</sup> Evan D. Garner, “Living by the Word: Reflections on the Lectionary,” *Christian Century*, June 5, 2019, 21.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

allegiance to the lesser powers that threaten us rather than embracing the overwhelming power that liberates us.”<sup>4</sup>

Today, most of us are like those villagers. We are fearful of what Jesus might do in our community, in our society, or in our world. For much like the Garasene demoniac, Jesus’ actions seem odd and unpredictable in our sight. Yet, if we are bold enough to meet him in the midst of our own dysfunction and brokenness, then we just might find in him the promise of new life. May it be so and all thanks be to God. Amen.

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<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.