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Coming to grips with the Gerasene Demoniac

Today's gospel seems to me both familiar and unfamiliar. It contains images that we can readily recognize: Jesus in a boat, pigs (although we're not accustomed to seeing them in herds), crowds flocking for news of some deed performed by Jesus, small town people showing up to see the spectacle or to confirm a rumor overheard. But the lesson also has things that seem less familiar (or at least challenging): a man so violently possessed by demons that he will neither wear clothes nor be restrained by chains, who runs wild in the forest and chooses to live among tombs, an image of demon-possessed pigs throwing themselves off a hill and drowning.

I'm always telling my students that moments of tension (such as here between the familiar and the unfamiliar) can lead to productive confusion. You have to exist with the facts that you don't understand and let them speak to you. Sometimes clouds will part, and sometimes the tension between what we understand and what we don't just provides a creative spark, or urges us to look further. The tension between the familiar and the unfamiliar in the story of what Biblical commentators call the Gerasene demoniac, I think, can provide us with just such a creative emotional spark.

Maybe it can be a spiritual spark, as well—it is good to remember that very many things in the Bible don't make intellectual sense. If we take Paul's letter to the Galatians to heart, perhaps this is the moment to rely on faith for understanding. If we are no longer prisoners of the law, perhaps we are no longer prisoners of logic when it comes to spiritual matters. Now certainly I'm not advocating the abandonment of reason altogether. It helps to apply knowledge to today's reading. But I do think it also helps to revel in what is unknowable and to decide that faith can shape our response.

Through the past few weeks of Gospel readings, we have been following Jesus as he works miracles and associates with unpopular figures (tax collectors, prostitutes), and today's encounter with the Gerasenes fits that mold. Yet it also goes deeper and opens a host of questions about Jesus and about ourselves—only some of which, it seems, can be answered. If the Gospel is both familiar and unfamiliar, is it also possible for us to accept both clarity and confusion—knowledge and faith—demons and the divine? We might now know how, but Jesus clearly has the power to heal and to conquer over evil—and that is tremendously reassuring.

In this incident, Jesus is battling demons, but he is also ministering to a man who is clearly in pain. As soon as the possessed man saw Jesus, he threw himself at Jesus' feet, and (is it the demons speaking?) and begged for mercy. In the modern western world, we would be more likely to attribute this Gerasene man's behavior to mental illness rather than to demon possession. Our social context for dealing with people who hurt themselves or who seem confused or violent is different, but we still share the fear inspired in the rest of the Gerasene's by this man's behavior. By placing him under guard, they had tried to contain him. We might use a hospital or a prison for such a man. We don't share the explanation for his behavior, but probably would share some of the fear that such behavior inspired in the people of the area.

When Jesus commands the demons to leave the man, the act is unfamiliar to us—but to the original readers of Luke’s gospel (steeped in magical practices and, like most people in the world, believers in demon possession and exorcism), this act would have been much more familiar. To us, the more familiar part comes when Jesus “asked the man his name.” Even in our current context, asking the man his name makes perfect sense—it is precisely the kind of thing that health professionals might do to assess whether the man was lucid, or the kind of thing a police officer might ask upon first encountering an individual who had caused havoc in the community before. The man’s response—“Legion” translated in some versions as “mob”—shows us just how badly he has it. In a literal sense, he has been possessed by a mob of demons, by many different forces of evil. Also, he has totally lost his individual identity. He no longer has a name, but for the forces that possess him.

It seems noteworthy that the demons seem to understand Jesus’ power better than almost anyone else in the story. They ask him not to drive them out, and then when it becomes clear that he means to heal the possessed man, they ASK him to be allowed to go into the herd of pigs. I can even make logical sense of this—evil recognizing the power of Jesus and working to save itself. It’s a familiar kind of bargain—just let me go into the pigs, and I won’t bother you again. To early Christians, this image was likely to have seemed humorous, as I must confess it does to me! To Jews, the pigs were already unclean, so why not add some demons? But haven’t we just heard that the old laws aren’t so useful anymore? The confusing part for me, comes when the pigs (in a herd!) throw themselves off the cliff. Why did they do it? Did this really kill the demons, or just release them elsewhere? Here’s where my logic starts to trip me up, and I have to go back to just letting the text wash over me. Clearly, the Gerasene’s had something of the same response—they see that Jesus is powerful, but the image of the wild man who had clearly disrupted their community now healed as the pigs plunge into the sea clearly frightened them. They ask Jesus to leave!

It’s the man himself who really sees the power of Jesus. He asks to go along to become a disciple, but Jesus leaves him behind and tells him to go and tell the people “How much God has done for you.” Luke tells us he obeyed, and I really wish we could see more of the “after” in the Gerasene community. Where is the man now? Was he able to put on clothes and live in a house? Did the swineherds forgive him?

By looking at this story closely, and by living in the confusion it causes, I do think we can have a creative response that reinvigorates our current-day faith. As the historian and religious writer Gary Wills writes, “Jesus does not work miracles for their own sake...His miracles are targeted to teach lessons about the heavenly reign he brings with him, and one of the main lessons is that people should not be separated into classes of the clean and the unclean, the worthy and the unworthy, the respectable and the unrespectable (29)...No outcasts were cast out far enough in Jesus’ world to make him shun them—not Roman collaborators, not lepers, not prostitutes, not the crazed, not the possessed. Are there people now who could possibly be outside his encompassing love (32)?” Wills goes on to discuss how Jesus’ miracles should teach us not to judge or ostracize in his name—not to exclude homosexual men and women, or the poor, or the disturbed from our church. After thinking about Wills’ ideas, this story of Jesus as exorcist started to make a whole lot more sense to me.

Biblical scholars have argued in a variety of contexts that the story of the Gerasene Demoniac can provide comfort in the knowledge of God's power and healing. The Gerasene Demoniac has been seen as an example of the God's power to ameliorate the pain of mental illness, sexual abuse, drug addiction, and a whole host of other "demons."

I think that if we suffer from mental illness, compulsion, bad behavior, evil thoughts—we can still have enough faith to ask Jesus to help. Whatever the "demon," it seems that faith can provide some help. Don't identify with the demons in the story and be afraid of what Jesus can do. I'm not saying not to take medicine, or not to seek counseling, or to stop enforcing civil laws—I'm just saying that in our individual lives, looking to faith might also add power to the more familiar solutions in today's world. It also means that perhaps we, like the formerly possessed man, ought to tell people what a difference God has made in our lives. Can we face the angry crowd? In the words of today's psalm "From the horns of the wild oxen you have rescued me. I will tell of your name to my brothers and sisters; in the midst of the congregation I will praise you."

If a man possessed by a mob of demons, maybe so can we.

As the verse of an old hymn put it:

"Deep in the human heart, crushed by the tempter,
Feelings lie buried which grace can restore.
Touched by a loving hand, wakened by kindness,
Chords that were broken will vibrate once more." (Horsefield 150)

AMEN

Gary Wills, What Jesus Meant (New York: Viking, 2006).

Peter Horsefield, "The Gerasene Demoniac and the Sexually Violated," in Violence against Women and Children, ed. Carol J. Adams & Marie M. Fortune (New York: Continuum, 1995), 141-150.

The New Interpreter's Bible, Vol. 9 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995)