**March 7, 2021 Mark 5:1-20**

***Who Is This Man?***

**Scripture:** Mark 5:1-20 NRSV

*(1)They came to the other side of the sea, to the country of the Gerasenes. (2)And when he had stepped out of the boat, immediately a man out of the tombs with an unclean spirit met him. (3)He lived among the tombs; and no one could restrain him any more, even with a chain; (4)for he had often been restrained with shackles and chains, but the chains he wrenched apart, and the shackles he broke in pieces; and no one had the strength to subdue him. (5)Night and day among the tombs and on the mountains he was always howling and bruising himself with stones. (6)When he saw Jesus from a distance, he ran and bowed down before him; (7)and he shouted at the top of his voice, "What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I adjure you by God, do not torment me." (8)For he had said to him, "Come out of the man, you unclean spirit!" (9)Then Jesus asked him, "What is your name?" He replied, "My name is Legion; for we are many." (10)He begged him earnestly not to send them out of the country. (11)Now there on the hillside a great herd of swine was feeding; (12)and the unclean spirits begged him, "Send us into the swine; let us enter them." (13)So he gave them permission. And the unclean spirits came out and entered the swine; and the herd, numbering about two thousand, rushed down the steep bank into the sea, and were drowned in the sea. (14)The swineherds ran off and told it in the city and in the country. Then people came to see what it was that had happened. (15)They came to Jesus and saw the demoniac sitting there, clothed and in his right mind, the very man who had had the legion; and they were afraid.  (16)Those who had seen what had happened to the demoniac and to the swine reported it. (17)Then they began to beg Jesus to leave their neighborhood. (18)As he was getting into the boat, the man who had been possessed by demons begged him that he might be with him. (19)But Jesus refused, and said to him, "Go home to your friends, and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and what mercy he has shown you." (20)And he went away and began to proclaim in the Decapolis how much Jesus had done for him; and everyone was amazed.*

**Notes:**

1. Who is this? Jesus, Son of the ***Most*** ***High*** God.
   1. Jesus and his disciples enter a ***gentile*** land.
   2. The demoniac is described in great detail, to the ***discomfort*** of Jewish listeners.
   3. Jesus makes the man ***clean*** and ***well***.
2. Jesus is redefining the boundaries of ***holiness***.
   1. Who can calm the wind and waves, and restore people to a place of ***wholeness*** and ***community***?
   2. Point to the ***power*** that Jesus has.
   3. Jesus longs to bring us into ***wholeness*** and ***community***.
3. God longs for us to view holiness as ***love***-***centered***.
   1. Focus on our ***love*** for God and others instead of on ***rules***.
   2. You carry the ***message*** with your presence, care, and love.
   3. We are all set free through His ***sacrifice***, mercy, and grace.
   4. ***Love*** has the power to restore all of us.

**Script:**

Do you remember the commercial that states, “My broker is E.F. Hutton, and E F Hutton says…” And with those words everybody in the vicinity turns to hear what you are about to say. Because of everybody’s reaction to the words; you know that E.F. Hutton has clout.

Do you know somebody like that somebody with clout? There is a popular miracle story in the Gospel of Mark—the calming of the sea. Jesus falls asleep on the boat, and a great storm overtakes it. The disciples are terrified and wake him. Jesus rebukes the wind and commands the sea, “Peace! Be still.” And the storm ends. The disciples are terrified and ask each other, “Who is this? Even the winds and waves obey him!”

That is an important question. *Who is this?* It is a question we might be asking ourselves today, although maybe not for the same reasons and not in the same way. And so, on the very heels of this question, we come to today’s text, a text that features a man possessed by demons, living in tombs, in a gentile land. This man with self-inflicted wounds upon his body approaches Jesus as he steps out of the boat, and almost as an answer to the question still hanging in the air around the disciples, he shouts out, “What do you want with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God?” Turn with me and stand; as we share in the reading of today’s Gospel passage, found in Mark 5:1-20

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Who is this? Jesus, Son of the Most High God. That is what I hope to address today, as we look into the hidden meanings of this passage, and not only the symbolism found here, but also, the meanings found in the actions of the characters. **Jesus and his disciples enter a gentile land.** Mark notes that they enter the region of the Gerasenes, but there is some debate about whether that is where they actually were, since the Gerasenes were landlocked. Some manuscripts call the place Gergesenes; Matthew calls it the Gadarenes. The focus for Mark, however, is not so much an exact location but to emphasize that this is a gentile area. Gerasa was a part of the Decapolis, making it a central part of the Greco-Roman world. Mark wants to make it clear that Jesus’s mission is clearly expanding to those outside Judaism.

**The demoniac is described in great detail, to the discomfort of Jewish listeners.** He lives in the tombs. It was commonly believed at the time that demons were the spirits of the dead, so a Jewish audience hearing about someone described as living in the tombs would understand he was demon-possessed. The tombs detail would also trigger thoughts of uncleanness to Jewish ears—because Jews were not supposed to touch dead bodies. This man cuts himself with stones. Leviticus 19:28 forbids “cutting your bodies for the dead.” Self-injury was often a sign of worship in other religions. A Jewish audience would hear that he cut himself and have another reason to consider the man unclean.

There are pigs. Even though the Jews might view the demons entering the pigs as a good thing since the pigs are already unclean in Jewish eyes, the very presence of a herd of pigs in this story would upset the Jews. Moreover, it is yet another reminder that they are in gentile territory. This man is naked. When others are called to see what has happened, they find the man “dressed and in his right mind.” The implication is that, just as he was not in his right mind previously, he also was not clothed. Public nakedness was a shameful thing in Jewish culture and another signal to Jews that the man was unclean.

**Jesus’s interaction with this unclean gentile demoniac according to Jewish law, should also make** **Jesus unclean but instead of being made unclean, Jesus makes the man clean and well.** Jewish law is clear that in order to remain pure and holy, one must not only avoid doing things that would make them unclean but also avoid touching and interacting with unclean people. This is why those deemed unclean had to leave communities or announce their uncleanness to passersby. Jesus breaks an expected boundary in multiple ways. First, rabbis are not expected to enter gentile areas. Then the demoniac approaches him, and instead of ignoring the man, Jesus engages him. Jesus does not become unclean by this encounter but instead has the power to make the man clean. This detail is important because it connects with the stories that follow.

In the following verses, Jesus raises a dead girl to life by touching her, which Jews were not supposed to do or they would be unclean. However, instead of becoming unclean, Jesus raises the girl to life. On his way to heal the dead girl, Jesus heals a woman who has been hemorrhaging blood for more than a decade. Jewish women who were bleeding were viewed as unclean. Men couldn’t even sit on chairs that menstruating woman had sat on, or they would be made unclean. But when the bleeding woman touches Jesus, he is not made unclean; she is made well.

Jesus is redefining the boundaries of holiness. The boundaries are no longer about avoidance. Jesus longs to see all people restored to wholeness and life, regardless of where they currently are. **Who is he? Who can calm the wind and waves? He is also the one who has the power to restore people to a place of wholeness and community.** Someone who was viewed as unclean and unwanted, both by Jews and gentiles, becomes restored to the community. This is a very clear image: the man physically lived outside the community, and now is drawn into community. He was also separated from himself in many ways, and was given wholeness and clarity of mind.

There is powerful use of military language in this story, which can mean a few different things, but it seems to point to the power that Jesus has. Legion—the name of the group of demons inside the man—is a word used to describe a division of the Roman army made up of about six thousand soldiers. Jesus “orders” the demons with the word used for military command. The pigs rushing into the sea is the same language used for troops rushing into battle.

The imagery shows how powerful the opposition to Jesus is, yet the way the story is told emphasizes the strength and power of Jesus. The disciples and others are questioning who Jesus is, but the demoniac instantly recognizes Jesus as the Messiah, running to him and calling him “Son of the Most High God.” This story again answers the question, who is he? Even the wind and waves obey. Even powerful demons obey. Even the Roman military, by implication, is powerless before the Messiah.

**Jesus, the Son of the Most High God, longs to bring us into wholeness and community too.** During Lent, we have time to reflect deeply on the ways that we have been separated from God andfrom community. At times these reflections make us feel unworthy. We sometimes look at our sin and think there is no way that God would want us. We are reminded that God is God *with* us. God goes to where we are, wherever that might be, to illustrate his love for us. While it might have been shocking to the Jewish listeners to witness the Messiah behaving in ways they didn’t expect, it is in God’s character to love that much.

God longs for us to view holiness as love-centered instead of law-centered. We, like the Jews, can get caught up in marking boundary lines. But when we are motivated by love, when we are holy, the love and grace are more infectious than uncleanness of sin. We must be focused on our love for God and others instead of on rules.

Others are longing, this season and always, for a God who loves them and will go the distance for them, who has the power to save them too. If you know Him, you are the ones who carry that message; you carry the message with your presence, you carry the message with your care, and you carry the message with your love.

“Who is this man?” the disciples asked. It took a demon possessed man who identified him without question; waves and wind obey him; demons are commanded by Him with power; and we are all set free to live lives of wholeness and community, through His sacrifice, through His mercy, and through His grace.

Whatever is trapping us, whatever is keeping us away from wholeness and community, you are able to be set free; in fact Jesus desires to set us free. But he also desires to set those around us free as well. We are the ones who are able to share this message of hope and love with others. We must be the ones who don’t run from those the world despises. Instead, we must embrace them embrace them because we know that love transforms people and we know that love transforms them in the most powerful and beautiful ways. Love has the power to restore all of us into the person we were meant to be, into a community once again.