

## The Gerasene demoniac

This week we encounter this poor guy possessed by a legion of demons. For reference, a legion of soldiers in the Roman army was 6000 men. That's a heavy dose of the demonic.

Remember that our main questions for each of these stories are these: how does this story reveal the kingdom of God? For whom is it good news? And how are we invited to participate in the kingdom of God through this story?

Today's story allows us the opportunity to explore the demonic. People in first century Palestine had a very different understanding of demons than we do in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In fact, we might dismiss demons altogether, saying they're just products of ignorance and superstition.

Spiritual warfare is a common concept in certain Christian circles, especially charismatic ones, like the Pentecostals. Spiritual warfare is the battle against the demonic...the spirits of evil and darkness.

Our very cerebral, logical Christian circle struggles with the concept, and in fact many reject it.

I think that rejection is unwise. Although what would have been attributed to demons may be given a different explanation today, sometimes it's the most powerful way to grasp certain things.

This man haunting the Gerasene tombs today is generally believed to have suffered from severe, untreated mental illness. The leading contenders from what I've read are schizophrenia or severe bipolar disorder with mania and psychosis.

When I was in medical school, we rotated through the psychiatry hospital. We had a patient admitted who I've often thought about when I read this story.

I don't remember her diagnosis exactly, but I do know she was psychotic. I was assigned as her medical student. She was very menacing. She was a big woman – much taller and heavier than me. And oh, was she angry. She fumed and paced and glared.

She didn't speak, which made her all the more menacing. I sort of have to assume they knew her well enough to not expect her to truly become violent since she was on a regular ward and assigned a diminutive medical student who knew essentially nothing about severe mental illness. But she scared me.

The psychiatrist got her started back on her medications. Gradually she began to come around. She grew less hostile and calmer. She became able to carry on a conversation. When she was

discharged, she seemed a totally different person. She was all smiles and gave me a big hug when she left.

The difference from her first day to discharge has always seemed rather like the man in this story, only it wasn't as sudden.

We know a lot more about mental illness now. We know about neurotransmitters and brain chemicals. We have medicines that can treat those illnesses.

But people who have suffered from mental illness might not always completely reject the idea that something demonic gets hold of them.

The band Pink Floyd has a song called Brain Damage that was inspired by the mental illness of former band member Syd Barrett. One of the lines from the song is "there's someone in my head but it's not me."

Even as someone whose worst mental illness was an episode of depression, that has always resonated with me. It did indeed feel like there was someone in my head who wasn't me.

A huge part of the battle against the demon of mental illness is science and the discoveries of medications and therapy techniques that can achieve what would have seemed miraculous at one time.

But the chemical issues of the brain are not the only demon involved in mental illness. Another more subtle one is the reaction of other people to those who have a mental illness. Bias, fear, suspicion, discrimination, ostracism – all are still demons that people with mental illness have to fight. And while most of us are not likely to contribute to the science of treating mental illness, those are demons we might take on.

The idea of the demonic doesn't end with mental illness. When I preach or teach about the demonic, I've often used a photo from the integration of Little Rock High School in 1957. One of the 9 black students walking into school that day got separated from the other 8. In what is now an iconic photo, a lone black teenage girl is shown in her crisp brand new dress, clutching her books to her chest as a mob of white people follows, screaming at her.

It's hard to see that as anything other than demonic. Now that's not to say that those particular white people were themselves demons. It's to say that the demonic is the sort of mass reaction that grabs hold of a group of people...a reaction exemplified by racial violence. Even worse than that scene in Little Rock, was the mob violence associated with lynchings.

The Nazi fervor that took over ordinary German people is another good example. People who lived peaceably alongside Jewish neighbors...people who would never have been described as demonic... were suddenly overtaken by a demon that led them to betray those neighbors.

As much as our logical minds might not like it, I believe that spiritual warfare is a part of the inbreaking of the kingdom of God. And the demons recognize it before other people. Before Jesus says anything here, the demons are howling.

We know that on the cross, we are assured that the power of the demonic does not and will not win. But in this now and not yet time, before the complete fulfillment of the kingdom, the demons rage on.

What do we lose when we completely explain away the demonic? When we fail to believe that there might be more going on than just individual actions and the sum of individual actions, we never get at the root. We put all the blame on individuals. We fail to recognize that although individuals still bear responsibility for their actions, there is a driving force underneath those actions of which they may not even be aware.

For example, the demons of slavery and Jim Crow were brought down. And yet, though virtually all of us would like to think we are not racist, we live in a society where the residue of old Jim Crow systems still impacts black and brown people. The demon itself lives on. And in some ways it's worse because it's less visible.

So, for whom is this story good news? Well, very concretely the man who was possessed. You would think it would be good news for the villagers too. But it's not. What's up with that?

Maybe you say, it's just that they're upset about losing their livestock. But this is more than that. The villagers are afraid. See even though we say we want to be rid of demons, we get pretty comfortable with the familiar, even if it's a demonic familiar. And the sort of changes that might result from defeating those demons scare us.

Racism and all the other isms persist because deep down, the demon serves some people pretty well – particularly people in the more privileged group. The privileged group worries about losing that comfort and stability if the status quo changes.

So anti-racist work is met with resistance. People with chronic mental illness still make us uncomfortable and we still push them to the margins.

So yes, in the kingdom of God, spiritual warfare rages on. But the demons will still be defeated by the power of Jesus. The kingdom of God, in Jesus, breaks into all those places where people are ostracized and rejected.

In the kingdom of God, defeat of demons happens every time the barriers we put up between us and others are broken down.

The demons are defeated not only when someone is healed, but when those who previously rejected them recognize their humanity and bring them back into the community.

It's the power of Jesus that accomplishes that. But how are we invited to be a part? The foundation of spiritual warfare is prayer. We pray against those demons. We pray to lose our own demons – demons that lead us to reject those who are in fact victims of the demonic.

We spend time in contemplation...we let the love Jesus had for this man seep into our own hearts, minds, and souls.

We learn...we educate ourselves. Demons hate it when we do that.

And we act. What sort of action you take will vary by individual. Maybe it will be advocacy – letters to governing bodies. Maybe it will be volunteering. Maybe it will simply be overcoming your own discomfort and having a conversation with someone against whom the demons fight.

And we keep before us this vision – a vision where all God's creation lives together in peace and harmony. A vision of the kingdom of God where the demons are cast out and human beings and all creation are restored.