

“And They were Afraid of Him”

Mark 5:1-20

This story of Jesus and the man possessed by demons, of pigs taking a flying leap and townspeople with pitchforks – it can be pretty hard for us to understand. Last week, we talked about Jesus coming to stay at Zacchaeus’s house. Here was a guy who made terrible, destructive, greedy choices, yet, still, Jesus made a way for him to change his life, to be at peace, to find redemption. This makes sense – this we can relate to! We’ve all made bad choices; we’ve felt the relief of grace. But a man possessed by demons? What do we do with that?

Some read this story and draw comparisons to folk struggling with mental illness or addiction. Some read it as a metaphor for the Roman army occupying the lands. Others see it as a metaphor for the power of evil in our lives. However we read this story, it is clear that this man is suffering from forces beyond his control. For clarity’s sake, let’s call the man Eustace.

Usually in the Gospel of Mark, stories are told quickly with few details. For example, the entire story of Jesus’s baptism is told in just three verses and the book itself is only 16 chapters long. Mark writes breathlessly, frequently saying “immediately” this happened or “at once” they were there. Yet, here, Eustace’s story is told in 20 verses with lengthy descriptions.

But, the story is told so out of order. Did you notice that? Jesus meets Eustace before we hear his back story. The demons respond to Jesus’s exorcism before we’re told that Jesus said the words of exorcism. It’s almost like Mark is trying to draw us into the panicked, jumbled state of Eustace’s mind.

Here’s what we can see: this is Gentile country. We don’t know how long Eustace suffered from his affliction, but we can see that he is suffering. He couldn’t live in his own community anymore. This probably wasn’t peoples’ prejudice – they were really worried about

his safety and their own. He lived in the graveyards and mountains, away from town. They tried to restrain him; they tried to keep him safe. But not only was he wild and violent – he was so strong. He shattered the chains on his wrists and his ankles. He spent his life roaming the tombs and howling – deep, loud, eerie, unintelligible moans. And he beat himself. Was he trying to get the demons out? Maybe the howling and self-harm came from the human part of him that remained – seeing his life torn from him, seeing no way to be free from his tormentor.

This is Eustace's life – no occupation, no family, no companion. There seems to be only pain and awareness of his many demons. But when Jesus shows up, he runs to him and bows down before him. We must ask – is Eustace the one running or is it the demons? Is he fighting off their power or is evil trying to fight against redemption. Either way, Eustace can see what is happening, not knowing what will happen next.

Eustace is lost beneath the power of this evil, yet Jesus stands before him. And it's hard not to remember what happened to Jesus just two chapters before. After he called his disciples, he went to his hometown and was mobbed by the crowd – so much so that it prevented him from being able to eat. His family heard about all the commotion and they went out to *restrain* him. See, people weren't looking for Jesus because they believed in him, they said, "he has gone out of his mind." Then they accused him of being possessed by demons. They said he was using Satan's power to control demons.

Shockingly, perhaps, Jesus and Eustace have some striking things in common. They were both cast out by their communities and families. People tried to restrain both of them, but were not strong enough to succeed. They both spent their days and nights among the tombs and mountains – Eustace as a form of exile and Jesus in raising the dead and powerfully preaching and communing with God. Both of them were thought to have demons and, so, they were

vigorously dismissed and opposed. I wonder if, when Jesus saw Eustace, he felt a deep kinship with him and all that he suffered. I wonder if there wasn't some vulnerability in seeing this man face to face. Some of the people who were closest to Jesus for most of his life depicted him just like Eustace – howling, hurting himself and others, an object of fear and pity. Eustace held these evil spirits with all of their horrid destruction and distortion. Jesus is God and Holy Spirit – Jesus holds the awe and wonder and power and extraordinary challenge of his mission as messiah. They are not the same, but they are both living their lives with powerful roles to play in the cosmic fight of good versus evil.

Maybe when Jesus sees Eustace, he knows him in a very particular way. Maybe when Eustace sees Jesus, he understands him in a way that, really, no one else can. When Jesus frees Eustace from his torment, he is suddenly sane, calm, quiet, clothed properly. He is the living embodiment of an astounding miracle. And they were afraid of him. They knew him as crazy demon guy; they knew him as an outcast and as a scary story to tell their children. They were afraid and they didn't want him back.

Jesus had cast out this legion of demons. Now all the townspeople want is to cast him out. "Go back where you came from – don't confront us with things we can't understand, with holy mystery, with cutting disruption. Get out." Is it any wonder that Eustace wants to go, too? Is it any wonder that he is bound forever to the one who undid what bound him so tightly? This place wasn't his home anymore; these people weren't his people; his family was long since done with him. How could he not yearn to follow after Jesus?

And something else remarkable happens here. In Mark's Gospel, Jesus almost always performs miracles and then tells people not to tell anyone what he has done. He says not to tell people about him, but they do anyway – over and over again. But, here...Jesus tells Eustace to

stay with his own. Jesus tells Eustace to tell everyone what happened. All of a sudden, in this one case, Jesus doesn't want it to be a secret that he is the Messiah. God has done so much for Eustace, shown him so much mercy, and it is his job to tell everyone. The Gentiles were afraid of Jesus, but Eustace understood Jesus in a way that no one else could. Perhaps it is only because of the unique things that they share that Jesus told him that he was the one – that he was ready to tell the story even before Jesus's earthly mission had reached its climax.

They were afraid of him – of Jesus, of Eustace, of things they could not control or understand. In the face of such fear, Jesus tells Eustace to be strong like he never has been before. Jesus tells Eustace to stay, to talk to his neighbors, to help them understand what is happening and what grace awaits them.

In these trying times, many of us are angry and afraid. We have seen the human toll in Afghanistan, wanted to look away from the images of desperate crowds, the people wounded and killed, mothers offering up their children for the chance of safety. We weep and mourn for the service members lost in the suicide bombing – for all who lost their lives in this war that seems to keep clawing its way into the future. We are angry and afraid and we are turning that anger on one another. Reconstructed timelines cast blame on one party or another, one president or another. How does that comfort those whose losses and grief are personal? How does that honor the sacrifices of so many? How does that make us stronger?

Eustace wanted to follow after Jesus. He wanted to leave the fear and anger of his countrymen, to set off on a journey with likeminded folks – safe and far away. Jesus said, “no.” Jesus told him to be with his community, to help them not to be afraid, to teach them about grace. Just as Eustace was so touched by the horror and injustice of the evil he had seen, so he was charged to bring the word of abiding peace to all around him. We will not move forward

together by tearing one another down. We will heal and be more holy by mourning together, by listening to one another, by seeing the light of Christ that unites us all. May we all be so brave as to embrace one another with this love. Amen.