

A Storytelling Commentary on Luke 8:26-39

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The story of the Gerasene demoniac is thoroughly shaped by Jewish norms. This becomes apparent in the description of Gerasa as opposite Galilee. The implication is that Gerasa is on the other side and implies that the Gerasenes are the enemy. It is the place of demons and uncleanness. It is a place where pigs need to rush down the hill and be drowned in the sea. This is clearly not a Gentile norm of victory. This is a Jewish victory over "uncleanness" in the world. Another sign of the Jewishness of this story is the name of the demon, "legion." The multitude of evil spirits are named as the major division of the oppressing Roman army, the legion. These are appeals to ancient Jewish norms in the story.

The telling of this story is an adventure for a storyteller. It begins with the setting of the scene: "They arrived to the country of the Gerasenes, opposite Galilee. And as he stepped out on land, a man of the city who had demons met him." What an intriguing intro! Then there is an explanation of the man with demons: for a long time he had worn no clothes and he did not live in a house but he lived in the tombs, in the cemeteries. The naked man literally lived among the dead.

When he saw Jesus he fell down before him and shouted at the top of his voice. This is Luke's description of how you are to tell the story. It's the loudest you can be, as loud as you can make it. Next there is an explanation to the audience by the storyteller: "Jesus had commanded the unclean spirit to come out of the man and many times it had seized him. He was kept under guard bound with chains and shackles but he'd break the bonds and be driven by the demon into the wild." This is all inside information from the storyteller to the audience and in contrast to the demoniacs cry should be told quietly, with a big contrast in volume, and in a tone of the sinister.

Jesus asks his name. If you know the name of a demon, you can dominate it. This element of the story reflects ancient myths in regard to evil spirits. But the name of the powers of evil in the story is not mythological at all. The demon's name is the name of the legions of Rome, which is code for Jewish listeners who endured Roman domination and oppression. The legion is named by the powers of evil, "for many demons had entered him." Once more, the storyteller is offering an inside explanation to the audience.

The demons begged Jesus not to order them to go back into the abyss. The ancient mythology about demons was that they came up out of the abyss, out of Hell, and tortured people. But they didn't want to go back into the abyss. The storyteller explains to the audience that there was a large herd of swine feeding on the hillside and the demons begged Jesus to let them enter the pigs. He had mercy on them and gave them permission. The demons came out of man, entered the swine, and the whole herd rushed down the steep hill and was drowned in the sea.

This is not a story for Midwestern pig farmers. It is a story for ancient Jews. The implication is that while the demons were not sent back into the abyss, they were sent back where the demons belong: in the waters under the earth where the powers of chaos live and are in control. This also reflects ancient mythology. Jesus has won a great victory for the people of Israel. So tell this part with a tone of, "Whoopee!"

The end of the story is the response of the Gerasenes, which also reflects Jewish norms. The man is in his right mind but the people don't care about the man. They do care about their pigs. They're afraid of Jesus and ask him to go back to his own country. The Gentiles don't want a Jewish prophet defeating the powers of evil and uncleanness in their neighborhood.

So Jesus gets in the boat to go back. The man wants to go with him and Jesus refuses, but appoints him as an evangelist among the Gentiles. Jesus has him return home and tell the story of what God has done for him. The man goes back and he tells what Jesus had done for him. This is Luke's way of implying that the man, as well as the demons, recognized who Jesus was. He was God, and he had control over the powers of evil.

One of the things that sometimes happens in hearing this story is that people get overly sympathetic with the pigs. It really is important for the purposes of this story to recognize and affirm the ancient Jewish norms that pigs were unclean animals. The impact of this story is that Jesus wins a battle over the powers of evil, and no human being is killed. The people are all given life, which is clearly the norm of this ancient story.

This is a very dramatic story of a man being set free from demons that had possessed him and of Jesus restoring him to his right mind. He is a Gentile, so Jesus' initial venture into Gentile territory includes the healing of a Gentile—saving him from domination by the powers of evil. It is a profoundly significant act of compassion and power.