

Jesus Heals the Legion  
Mark 1:1-20  
Psalm 89:1-4

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Mark 1:1-20

They came to the other side of the lake, to the country of the Gerasenes. And when he had stepped out of the boat, immediately a man out of the tombs with an unclean spirit met him. He lived among the tombs; and no one could restrain him any more, even with a chain; 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. Night and day among the tombs and on the mountains he was always howling and bruising himself with stones. When he saw Jesus from a distance, he ran and bowed down before him; 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.' For he had said to him, 'Come out of the man, you unclean spirit!' Then Jesus asked him, 'What is your name?' He replied, 'My name is Legion; for we are many.' He begged him earnestly not to send them out of the country. Now there on the hillside a great herd of swine was feeding; and the unclean spirits begged him, 'Send us into the swine; let us enter them.' 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 lake, and were drowned in the lake.

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. 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. Those who had seen what had happened to the demoniac and to the swine reported it. Then they began to beg Jesus to leave their neighborhood. As he was getting into the boat, the man who had been possessed by demons begged him that he might be with him. 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.' And he went away and began to proclaim in the Decapolis how much Jesus had done for him; and everyone was amazed.

Psalm 89:1-4

I will sing of your steadfast love, O Lord, for ever;  
with my mouth I will proclaim your faithfulness to all generations.  
I declare that your steadfast love is established for ever;  
your faithfulness is as firm as the heavens.

You said, 'I have made a covenant with my chosen one,  
I have sworn to my servant David:  
"I will establish your descendants for ever,  
and build your throne for all generations." '

God loves the whole world so much that Jesus did not come into the world to judge the world. That would have been the easy thing to do, wouldn't it? You just line everybody up, and Jesus looks at each one. "You're bad. You're bad. You're bad. Ooh, you're really bad."

But no. That's not how Jesus does things. He didn't come into the world to judge it. He came into the world to save it.<sup>1</sup>

We don't know for certain why Jesus and his disciples had come to Gentile country, but I suspect Jesus wanted a break. He had been teaching and healing for quite a while. The crowds were getting kind of excessive, to the point that people were doing extreme things like cutting holes in roofs to get their friends in front of Jesus. So, if Jesus wanted a break, I could understand that.

But, as soon as he steps out of the boat, a man comes running out of the cemetery! This man lives out in the cemetery, among the tombs, where nobody is willing to come after him.

Scripture says that the man is possessed by a demon. One understanding of this is that he is mentally ill. Another is that the literal translation may not be entirely wrong – many addicts and their families speak about the addict being like another person when they are drunk or high.<sup>2</sup> The people around Jesus certainly believed in literal demons that could control people's every word and action.

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<sup>1</sup> John 3:17.

<sup>2</sup> Yes, there arguably is a theological basis for Prohibitionists talking about, "that demon rum"

So I caution you, don't be too quick to dismiss this story and the other exorcisms in Scripture. They are healings, whether or not we completely understand what happened.

This man corners Jesus as soon as Jesus gets off the boat. He clearly knows who Jesus is, and he yells at him.

This man is suffering, and Jesus sees that.

Jesus has compassion on him.

This man is not a Jew. He's a pork-eating Gentile from the Ten Cities.

But Jesus has compassion on him.

He is an outsider even among the Gentiles. Everyone in his community has given up on him. He lives in the cemetery, an unclean place where other people only go when they have to.

But Jesus has compassion on him.

Jesus is not here on Earth to be Miracle Max, the local village healer.<sup>3</sup> He is not here to be the Ghostbusters.

But Jesus has compassion on him.

Jesus sees that the man has been pushed away from his community. He's out in the cemetery, out of sight and out of mind for them. Life is so much easier when they didn't have to deal with the troubled man or even think about him.

This is how societies deal with problems. We push the poor, the needy, and the different to the margins. We don't want to see them. As we strive for our

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<sup>3</sup> *The Princess Bride*.

dreams and gather more stuff (don't get me started on stuff),<sup>4</sup> we don't want to be distracted by them or reminded of their plight.

Jesus went to the margins. He did ministry with the people there – people with unclean spirits, and lepers, the blind, the sinful. If we're going to follow Jesus, we need to follow him to the people whom we don't see in our normal haunts.

But that's the easy answer about this Scripture passage. Of course we need to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and visit the sick and those in prison! That's Matthew 25, the story of the sheep and the goats,<sup>5</sup> we know the story. "[Jesus,] If we'd 'a known it was you, we'd 'a taken you around the corner for a cup a'coffee..."<sup>6</sup> We're done, right?

Not so much.

All of that is true, and in the Scriptures, and worthy of repetition. But that's all surface-level stuff.

It's certainly a safe interpretation.

But Jesus is not a safe Messiah.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> George Carlin, one of my all-time favorite stand-up philosophers, did a wonderful piece on "Stuff" that is quoted at <http://www.allreadable.com/e69382te>. It appeared on the album *A Place for My Stuff* (1981). The congregation has heard me do a censored version of that monologue from the pulpit.

<sup>5</sup> Matthew 25:31-46.

<sup>6</sup> *Godspell* (1973).

<sup>7</sup> "He is not a tame lion." — C. S. Lewis, *The Lion, The Witch, and the Wardrobe*.

Jesus was not crucified because he was a nice guy, or because he made the lives of the people around him so much easier. He was crucified because he fought against demonic forces in this world.

There are demonic forces in the world, that corrupt human beings' ability to see the world as it really is, and that corrupt our ability to relate to God. They make people say and do things that they would never do if they were in their right mind. I do not believe that they are individual creatures, each with their own free will, but the effect is often the same as if they were.

I am NOT talking about mental illness. Mental illness is a real thing, as real as physical illness. It's not a character flaw any more than arthritis is, or cataracts. It should be taken seriously and treated just as you would physical illness.

I'm talking about demonic spiritual forces.

Fear is a demonic force.

Fear gets in the way of seeing the world as it really is, because you see monsters under every bed and in every corner.

Fear gives power to abusers, because, if people are afraid enough, they will rationalize anything, say anything, do anything to feel safe. This is true whether the abuser is a Roman governor, or a wife-beating husband, or a contemporary politician.

Fear leads to vilifying other human beings, made in the image of God, as evil based on the color of their skin. Or where they were born. Or simply because you don't know them.

Fear gets in the way of our relationship with God. There is a reason that the most frequent command in the Bible is, "Fear Not." If you are afraid, then that takes up your energy and your thoughts. Your thoughts and your energy would be better spent focusing on loving God and on your neighbors. Your neighbors as they really are, generally decent people, not the inhuman or subhuman monsters that fear would have you see them as.

Greed is a demonic force.

Greed cannot be satisfied with any amount of money, or goods, or power. Greed denies the very concept of "Enough." Greed causes people to take what other people need, to have what they themselves want or even "would kinda like." Greed causes people to hoard wealth far beyond what they could ever spend.

Greed starts out with fear, particularly fear that you will run out. But after a while, it takes on a life of its own.

Hate is a demonic force.

Hate is not the opposite of love, it's not that simple.<sup>8</sup> Even pop culture told me when I was a kid where hate comes from. "Fear is the path to the dark side. Fear leads to anger. Anger leads to hate. Hate leads to suffering."<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> The opposite of love is indifference.

<sup>9</sup> *Star Wars V: The Empire Strikes Back* (1980).

Fear leads to anger. Someone who lives their life in fear is going to get angry eventually. Angry that they're afraid. Angry about the effect that fear is having on them, curtailing their life. That leads to hate.

Someone who hates other people wants to destroy them or make their lives so terrible that they go far away. You can see how that could start from fear – it seems like a logical response to fear, but it gets out of hand. It can lead to doing terrible things.

Hate gets in the way of a relationship with God even more than fear does. John said, "Those who say, "I love God," and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen."<sup>10</sup>

These demonic forces are real. They can warp people's worldview and their personalities, and never for the better. Worse, they are contagious — one person speaking these forces into being can affect a whole room full of people.

But you know what else is real, and just as contagious?

Hope.

Hope lets us refuse to hate our siblings. And they're all our siblings.

Hope lets us resist greed.

Hope lets us resist fear.

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<sup>10</sup> I John 4:20.

So, this week, have hope!

Be careful with the people whom you see who are affected by these demonic forces. They can be dangerous, just as the Gerasene Demoniac was.

But never let go of hope. Show them love, and hope. It is possible for them to recover, to kick off these demonic forces. But it doesn't happen without hope.

Truly I tell you, Jesus Christ came into the world not to judge the world, but to save it. That means that God, the ultimate judge, says it's worth saving.

That includes them.

And that includes you.

So have hope!

Thanks be to God.

Amen.