

Seeing Others with New Eyes

August 26, 2018

Sermon by Pastor Cindy Bullock

The Holy Gospel according to St. Mark. (Mark 5: 1-20)

[Jesus and the disciples] came to the other side of the sea, 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 anymore, 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 sea, and were drowned in the sea.

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.

The Gospel of our Lord.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

This is the third in our series of "Seeing with New Eyes." As I said before, we talked about "Seeing Through the Lens of Love." We talked about "Seeing Ourselves with New Eyes." Today we consider "Seeing Others in a New Way." It is the third in the series.

But it is also summer. And summer is the time for big, blow-up-the-world blockbuster movies. It started back in April when the Avengers came, and it moved through Solo: A Star Wars Story. The Incredibles are back, as are the Jurassic dinosaurs. Mission Impossible had another mission. And apparently Ant-Man is a thing. Heroes to save us from the end of the world. Stopping the monsters or the evil villains. And we are on the edge of our seats – wondering what will happen next.

Today's gospel reading is that kind of story. A good "edge of your seat, what's going to happen now" kind of story. It begins on what is literally a dark and stormy night. Just before this reading, Jesus and the disciples were caught up in a windstorm on the Sea of Galilee, and the disciples woke up Jesus, saying, "Don't you care that we're dying?"

They get to shore, wet and shaking. And they find themselves in the Decapolis - a network of ten Roman cities on the northeast side of the lake. It's a place Galilean fishermen don't usually find themselves. A Greek city where they worship Greek gods and where people don't speak Aramaic.

Think of yourself, finding yourself unexpectedly on the shores of India. You don't speak the language; it's a majority Hindu country. You know nothing about the culture. You have no friends there. You have no guide with you. You are the ultimate outsider.

Jesus and his disciples are in a foreign country, with a different culture, where they don't speak the language, at night. What could possibly go wrong?

As they start down the road, the first thing they encounter is a graveyard – probably a series of caves dug into the limestone. Nothing scary about being in a foreign country in a graveyard at night, is there? "*Immediately,*" it says, "*a man with an unclean spirit comes out of the tombs.*" Now it's getting interesting. "*A man with an unclean spirit.*" Now, know that "unclean spirit" can mean anything from nonconformist to seriously mentally ill. This guy is leaning toward the latter.

A late Jewish document listed four criteria for serious mental illness.

1. Spending the night in a tomb. ✓
2. Tearing one's clothes off. ✓
3. Walking around at night. ✓
4. Destroying things received from others. ✓

This guy checks all the boxes for a deeply troubled soul. Add: howling, self-harm, and breaking chains. And now the disciples have crossed the lake and found themselves in a slasher movie.

What's next?

Think for a moment about how this story has built up.

- * They are in a foreign country without a guide.
- * In a graveyard at night.
- * Confronted by a naked man who is howling.
- * The aforementioned naked man is strong and cannot be bound or chained.
- * Everything about this story is ritually unclean. In other words, the things you're not supposed to do, in a place you're not supposed to do it, in a time of day you're not supposed to be there.

And who thought this was a good idea? It's like bringing back the Jurassic dinosaurs or freeing the angry monster. This story is strange. It is surreal.

Then the man speaks. "*I am Legion*," he says. This name is not as terrifying for us as it would have been for First Century Palestinian peasants. We think, "Oh, legion. There are a lot of demons." They would have thought, "Roman Army." A legion was a Roman Army force of five thousand soldiers. Five thousand massive, elite soldiers. An unstoppable force. "*My name is Legion*." It's like the name of the giant overpowering alien monster that drops down in the middle of New York City in a summer superhero movie. "*I am legion*."

Well, let's step outside this story for a moment, and think about the times when you have been afraid. Not TV or movie afraid, but really afraid. For most of us, it's when we're in the midst of the unknown or the uncontrollable. "I don't know what might happen in this new relationship." "I don't know the outcomes to this surgery." "I can't control the people in my family." "I can't keep myself safe in this neighborhood." "I might fail if I try this new position."

We are afraid of the unknown and the uncontrollable. Whether planned or unplanned, when we end up in the unknown and the uncontrolled, we are afraid. Fear keeps us from embracing new experiences and new possibilities. It pushes us back toward the familiar, the status quo, what I know. Fear trades "life-giving" for "safe." Fear makes us embrace, "What if?" instead of, "What's next?"

This story in Gerasene has all the elements of a fear-inducing, nail-biting, edge-of-your-seat story. The disciples can't even see what's going around them; much less understand it. They are facing a man that is powerful, unstoppable, a man that can't be controlled. They don't know what will happen. And I wonder if that leads them to our most elemental fear: "Can I trust God in this?"

There is much to be afraid of. But look over there at Jesus. Jesus is not afraid. He wasn't afraid in the boat during the storm. He wasn't afraid in the graveyard. And he's not afraid as this man speaks. And that tells me something.

That tells me that Jesus trusts God's power for life in the face of fear and death. Jesus trusts that God can bring life into this or any situation. Jesus trusts that God can give life to this man. Even this man. Not because Jesus is stronger, or can fly up in the air and shoot lasers at this guy. But because Jesus is willing to touch this man's pain and trust in God's power to give life. Jesus is willing to lean in, to risk everything on God's power for life. Over and over again, his trust is confirmed: in the storm at sea, in this graveyard, at the empty tomb. The story always ends in life. This story ends in life – a man sitting there, clothed and in his right mind.

We live in a world of fear. Fear of all that we don't understand and that we can't control. We fear those who are different from us in so many ways. The "others." There are always "others." The poor, the wealthy, the black, the white, the gay, the straight, the Republicans, the Democrats, the old, the young; all those we don't understand and we can't control.

Like the disciples entering the graveyard, we fear those who are different and hurting and howling. We are tempted in these times of fear to believe that God does not have the power to bring life. We are tempted in these times to lock our doors and isolate our families, hoping no one will notice, or disturb, or harm us. We are tempted to close our eyes to new possibilities, to hide from new experiences. Refuse to imagine a world where we can live together with all the "others" in blessed community.

But, you know, Jesus has never been big on safety or isolation. Jesus has never been big on being afraid. "*Fear not,*" he said so often. "*Receive the Holy Spirit,*" he said. "*As the Father has sent me, so I send you.*" And he said, "*Do not doubt but believe.*" Trust that God works in you and through you with the power to bring life.

You are given the power to build community with others. You are given the power to touch those in pain. You are given the power to offer mercy, forgiveness, hope, and healing. You have been given the power of the resurrection, to go into any place where there is fear and darkness, and say, "NO!" No. Death doesn't win. Fear doesn't win. Life, and hope, and mercy, and forgiveness, and love, and community, will always be the end of story.

I will trust in God's power for life, even in the face of fear and death. I will trust God's power for life, even in a graveyard on a dark night. I will trust God's power for life, even today. Even tomorrow.

Amen.