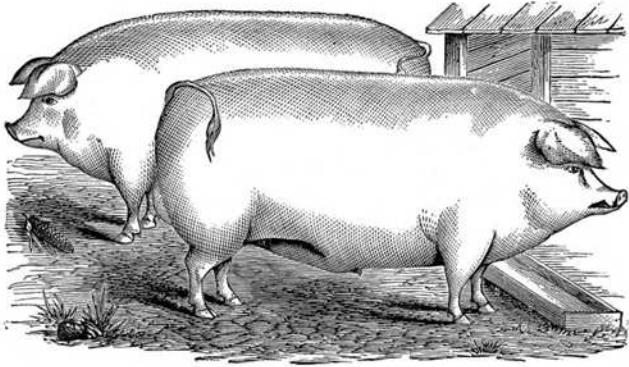


NOT THE PIGS!

(Sermon preached by Rev. Hubert, January 26, 2020. Scripture passage: Mark 5:1-20)



My New Testament prof was (and still is) a renowned scholar with many, many years of experience in ministry. And I remember her once telling us that the three big theological questions that she had been asked most were:

1. Do only Christians get saved? How about all those other faith traditions?
2. What happens when you die?
3. What about those poor pigs...?!

And I have a feeling that after hearing this morning's gospel story, many of us here today have that same question. So hold that thought, we'll get back to that.

First, a bit of context. This story follows immediately after Jesus calms a fierce storm that almost kills them as they're crossing the lake. Now in the Scriptures, whenever there's a big body of water, grave danger is implied. These were desert people, sea and lakes were alien to them. It was where monsters lived and evil lurking under the surface. Think of any scripture story that involves a body of water, and you'll see it. And Jesus shows that not only is he stronger than these evil sea powers, they even listen to him.

So they make it "to the other side" of the lake, still shaken from their near-death experience, but they are still far from safe. This is terra incognita, they are strangers in a strange and hostile land.... I imagine them arriving as quietly as they can to not draw any attention to themselves. Maybe it's a little foggy after that big storm. The disciples are looking around, kind of worried. "Why did we come here again...?" There's creepy, ominous cello music playing in the background... Think the Jaws soundtrack.

They gently step out of the boat... and then, *boom!* Out of the mist, this demon-possessed guy comes running up to Jesus, screaming at the top of his lungs! Mark doesn't tell us what the disciples do here, but I like to believe that they all scream like terrified ten-years-olds and scramble for the boat again.

Now for Jewish listeners of that time, all kinds of red flags are immediately going up here:

- "The other (i.e. the East) side" of the lake was a Gentile region, people you were not supposed to deal with, because as non-Jewish people they were ritually "unclean".
- They arrived at some cemetery, of all places. Cemeteries were ritually unclean and to be avoided; the demons of death lived there.
- The man who hangs out there is not only super unclean because of the neighbourhood he picked, he is possessed by evil spirits that live there.
- He is naked, and he mutilates himself. Unclean, and unclean.
- The only other residents there are... pigs. And pigs are ritually... unclean, you got it!

For any Jewish listener in the 1st century, the whole thing is one big religious horror show. And this possessed man at the heart of this horror story is barely a human being anymore. He lives among the dead. He rages, howls, he mutilates himself. People in the

town nearby had tried to restrain him with chains, but he kept breaking loose. He's like a monster, terrorizing everyone around him. All because of this demon that's possessing him, owning him, eating his very soul. He does not really have a life any more. He's practically a dead man walking.

For us now, demon possession and exorcism can be, well, tricky. Typically the way we read this story now is as a first century explanation for what we'd now call a mental illness. But that's not where I'm taking it today. Not because I think the topic of mental illness is unimportant. On the contrary, it's incredibly relevant, and I know that most if not all of us are directly or indirectly affected by it in some way.

What I want to focus on today is where Mark is coming from. For Mark, and for the Jesus we encounter in Mark, demons are real in the sense that "demons" describe the deadly forces that we humans can be consumed by.

Is that something we can agree on? Demons as personifications of the destructive, soul-consuming behaviour that can destroy us, both intentionally and unintentionally.

In that sense, demons and evil are quite real. We witness it every day. Whether it is small scale evil – the mistakes we have personally made or being hurt by the destructive choices of others – or the large scale evil that makes us makes people deny, say, climate change, or the evil that makes us believe that conflict can only be solved by creating even bigger conflict: war and the war machine that propagates it and feeds off it.

Evil can be a dehumanizing force; in church we call it "sin". It makes us think in terms of "us" versus "them", we are right and they are wrong, we are good and they are bad. It's the kind of demonic behaviour that alienates us from one another, that alienates us from our environment/creation, and from the life that God had in mind for us, both individually and as a society.

I believe Mark isn't just talking about one man's possession, but about an entire culture that is possessed, that has its soul eaten by death-dealing forces. Why do I think that? Because of the big give-away, the name of the demon: Legion...!

For 1st-century Jewish people, that name had only one possible meaning: a Roman Legion. A Roman legion was a large military unit, consisting of about 2,000 heavily armed soldiers. There were four of them in that area to control the Eastern part of the Roman Empire.

The Roman military were everywhere and controlled everything. They had all the privileges, all the good spots, all the food and resources, all the power. They made it quite clear, directly and indirectly, that *they* were the favoured residents, and the population they oppressed were second- and third rate.

The Roman Empire had created a system that crushed and conquered. In Mark's time, the empire had just destroyed the Great Temple in Jerusalem, and murdered all its priests. Soldiers could force people to carry their gear for a mile, they could claim someone's food or house. People were routinely crucified.

People lived in a culture of death and destruction. Anything that blocks the life that God intends for it – be it mental disease, addictions, abuse, fear, hatred, ignorance, bigotry, violence – anything like that has the power to possess us and eat our very soul.

When people are born into systems where they are hated, they will learn to hate others and come to hate themselves. When people are born into systems of economic disparity and scarcity, they are liable to become overly materialistic. They may steal and lie because it's the only choice they see to survive, and so forth and so on. To resist the monster, people become monsters themselves.

That's the context for Mark's gospel; everything he tells us is steeped in his daily reality of brutal Roman occupation and structural injustice. And when the demon says its name is Legion, there is no doubt what this story is about. So when Jesus heals the man, what he does is liberate him from the demonic powers of Empire that kill us spiritually and physically. Jesus restores him to life the way God intends it.

So yay for Jesus, God has won. Except, there is a little bit more to it... This healing, this liberation comes with a price to pay. Because did you notice how the towns people reacted? Were their eyes opened, did they bring more people to Jesus to be healed, did they start to follow him, as often happens in healing stories? No; their response was fear and anger. They wanted Jesus to go away and to leave them alone. The text says they *begged* him to go away, exactly as the demon had *begged* Jesus to leave him alone. So what's that about?

They're not looking for liberation from military occupation. Resisting or even questioning the Roman military means Roman retaliation, and who needs that? That's one reason why they reject Jesus' message and his gift of liberation.

Another reason is, they know that if the Roman soldiers leave, they will lose their income, their "way of life", meager as it might have been. After all, military occupation and the imperial war machine appear to be good for business. Our present-day military-industrial complex employs hundreds of thousands of people with well-paying jobs all over North America alone. And where would Halifax be without the Navy...?

And then, yes, there's those poor pigs... New Testament scholar Ched Meyer¹ makes an interesting observation about them. He points out something that's so obvious, hardly anyone noticed before: for some reason, Mark wants us to know *how many* pigs there were: "about 2000". Which also happens to be the size of most Legions: about 2000 soldiers. Hmmm... Coincidence?

Another New Testament scholar, John Dominic Crossan², also makes an interesting observation. He points out that each Roman Legion had its own symbol, its own mascot. And the symbol of the legion nearest to Galilee, the Fretensis Legion³, was... a boar. A wild pig. And suddenly, a lot of dots in this story get connected!

And yes, of course the pigs' owners are upset when their now demon-infested herd offs itself. By the way, Crossan also states that "herd" is not the usual Greek word for a group of pigs. This kind of "herd" refers to a large group of Roman military recruits! Jesus uses military language and "dismisses" them these evil forces. He dismisses to where they came from in the first place: the sea, where evil lurks. Symbolism doesn't often come more powerful than this.

The death of the pigs symbolizes what we'll have to give up if we're serious about Jesus' gift of liberation: our economy, the way we do business. Our economy (based on privilege,

power, competition, unsustainable growth expectations) blocks the one Jesus proposes: an economy based on justice, sharing, sustainability, love and *nonviolence*. An economy that benefits everyone, not just the privileged. So yes, God's economy is wonderful and something we can't wait to arrive – but it comes with a price tag for us. As any psychiatrist will tell you, getting rid of your inner demons is usually a hard and painful process.

I know, it's a lot to process, especially if it's the first time you hear this story from this particular angle. But whether you agree with it or not, Mark's text raises a bunch of tough questions about the demons that possess us, both individually and as a society. Do we *really* want to be healed – or are we just willing to accommodate some minor tweaks and leave the root cause alone?

Christ wants to heal us and show us the way forward into a new, just and nonviolent world. And we, the Church, are called to model what that world might look like. Here at St. John's we have come to a juncture in our history where we have this fantastic opportunity to put our resources and our actions where our mouth/the Gospel is.

This coming Saturday afternoon we will start the process of figuring out how St. John's can model that just world that God has in mind, and who might be good partners in it. It's not going to be easy, there will be lots of questions and uncertainty, maybe some friction, and it definitely will be uncomfortable; those are just some of the "pigs" we'll have to let go of. But we will also see miracles happen and lives restored – maybe even your own. And who wouldn't want to be part of that?

Amen.

¹ C. Myers, *Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark's Story of Jesus* (New York, NY, Orbis Books, 1988, 2008), 426.

² D. J. Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography* (New York, NY: Harper Collins Publishers, 1989), 90.

³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Legio_X_Fretensis

Mark 5:1-20 (Jesus heals a possessed man)

So they arrived at the other side of the lake, in the region of the Gerasenes. When Jesus climbed out of the boat, a man possessed by an evil spirit came out from the tombs to meet him. This man lived in the burial caves and could no longer be restrained, even with a chain. Whenever he was put into chains and shackles—as he often was—he snapped the chains from his wrists and smashed the shackles. No one was strong enough to subdue him. Day and night he wandered among the burial caves and in the hills, howling and cutting himself with sharp stones.

When Jesus was still some distance away, the man saw him, ran to meet him, and bowed low before him. With a shriek, he screamed, “Why are you interfering with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? In the name of God, I beg you, don’t torture me!” For Jesus had already said to the spirit, “Come out of the man, you evil spirit.”

Then Jesus demanded, “What is your name?” And he replied, “My name is Legion, because there are many of us inside this man.” Then the evil spirits begged him again and again not to send them to some distant place.

There happened to be a large herd of pigs feeding on the hillside nearby. “Send us into those pigs,” the spirits begged. “Let us enter them.”

So Jesus gave them permission. The evil spirits came out of the man and entered the pigs, and the entire herd of about 2,000 pigs plunged down the steep hillside into the lake and drowned in the water.

The herdsmen fled to the nearby town and the surrounding countryside, spreading the news as they ran. People rushed out to see what had happened. A crowd soon gathered around Jesus, and they saw the man who had been possessed by the legion of demons. He was sitting there fully clothed and perfectly sane, and they were all afraid. Then those who had seen what happened told the others about the demon-possessed man and the pigs. And the crowd began to beg Jesus to go away and leave them alone.

As Jesus was getting into the boat, the man who had been demon possessed begged to go with him. But Jesus said, “No, go home to your family, and tell them everything the Lord has done for you and how merciful he has been.” So the man started off to visit the Ten Towns of that region and began to proclaim the great things Jesus had done for him; and everyone was amazed at what he told them.