

"They Came to the Other Side of the Sea"

Have you ever been trying to get away, to take some sort of break or retreat from your work, and yet your work seems to follow you? Maybe you are a business owner and find it difficult to take a vacation, because things rely on you to keep running smoothly. Or maybe you are constantly on-call, and the phone always seems to ring at just the wrong moment with some emergency. Or maybe your roll at work is so specialized that whenever you take a day off, people from work are still calling you to get your help. As someone who's ran their own business before, I know it can be difficult and frustrating when you are trying to get away but can't.

In our passage for today, Jesus seems to be trying to get away and get some well deserved R&R. Remember from last chapter, that he had been preaching from a boat along the western shore of the Sea of Galilee. In chapter 4, we saw that Jesus was exhausted and had his disciples take him across to the other side of the Sea. Along the way Jesus quickly fell asleep, clearly very tired from all his preaching. Presumably Jesus was going to the other side of the sea to get away.

And this makes sense, because when we look at the gospels, we see that Jesus' earthly ministry was primarily focused on the Jews, and the other side of the sea would not have been Jewish territory. Most of Jews were in either Judea or Galilee, which was west of the Jordan River and the Sea of Galilee. However, Jesus and his disciples had gone to the eastern shore of the Sea of Galilee. This would have placed them in a larger area known as the Decapolis, which was mainly east of the Jordan, and made up primarily of Greeks. There would have been a lot of Gentiles here, and not too many Jews. The existence of some 2,000 pigs here should also clue you in as well that they were no longer in a place populated by very many Jews. So this would have been a likely place where Jesus might have found some rest while he charged back up for more ministry.

And yet, according to verse 2, immediately upon arrival at the other side of the sea, Jesus is confronted with a demoniac - with a demon-possessed man. And so Jesus' break is short lived. He wasn't able to get much sleep on the boat ride over because he was busy silencing storms, and now he finds himself confronted with a demon-possessed man who desperately needs help that only he can provide. And though we sinful people might have been frustrated if we were in Jesus' shoes, that's not how our Lord responds. As we might expect, he responds out of a true compassion and love and frees the man from these unclean spirits. And so as we look at this event, we'll see that the gospel message of freedom and reconciliation in Christ comes even to the Gentiles.

And as we consider this passage, I'd like for you to notice how long of an account this is. This single event takes up half of a large chapter in Mark. For Mark, being such a fast paced book, that's a lot of space to this single account. And, in fact, even though this account is recorded in the gospels of Matthew and Luke as well, it actually has its longest account, with the most details, in Mark. And so obviously Mark is slowing down his pace for a moment and giving us lots of details that he thinks are important. And so this morning, we'll look at the details of this account and then apply them to us. And as we look at this event, we'll find that there are three primary people or groups interacting with Jesus. There's the demon-possessed man. There's the demons themselves, referred to as Legion. And then there are the people from the surrounding area, the herdsman, and others from

the town and country in the area - we'll call them the townspeople. So there is the demons, the townspeople, and the demon-possessed man.

And each of these three groups not only have their own individual story in this event, they each are found to be "begging" Jesus. The demons beg Jesus in verses 10 and 12. The townspeople beg Jesus in verse 17 - our translation uses the word "plead," but it's the same Greek word. And the demon-possessed man who was healed begs Jesus in verse 18. The same Greek word for begging is used by each of these groups - a word that appears only 4 more times in the rest of Mark. And so Mark appears to be contrasting each of these groups, highlighting that they each have their own story, and they each have their own response to Jesus. And so that's how I'll organize the sermon for this morning. We'll look first at the story of these demons. Then we'll look at the story of these townspeople. Third and finally we'll look at the story of this demon-possessed man.

And so looking first at the story of these demons. Jesus' interaction with these demons is actually a great illustration of what he previously said that he came to do. In chapter 3, Jesus told a parable about a strong man. He said that no one can plunder a strong man's house unless you first bind the strong man. When we looked at Jesus' words in that parable we saw that they were referring to how Jesus in his ministry had come to bind the strong man, namely Satan. Jesus had come to bind the devil and all his evil works of afflicting God's people. And we had said that the exorcisms represented that binding of Satan. Each exorcism that Jesus did was looking forward to the binding of Satan that Jesus would do on the cross. And each exorcism ultimately looked forward to Satan's final destruction at the last day, when he and his fellow demons would be cast into the eternal lake of fire.

And so here on the other side of the sea, Jesus encounters a group of demons who were possessing a man. And look at what verse 3 says about these unclean spirits. They were so powerful, that "no one could bind" the man who was possessed by these demons. Verse 4 then goes on to talk about the people's failed attempts to *bind* this man and the demons. They tried human chains and shackles - but to no avail. No human could bind these demons. Who could "bind" this strong man, this man who was made strong by the presence of many unclean spirits? Only Jesus, the one who had come to bind the strong man.

And so when these demons are confronted by Jesus, they seem to quickly realize that they had met their match. These same demons who had defied every human attempt before to stop them, came running to Jesus and bowed down before him. Look at verse 6. Verse 6 records that when they saw Jesus, even from afar, they came running and worshipped him. Now the word for worship here is being used in the sense of prostration. They were either kneeling or bowing down before him. In other words, they likely weren't worshipping him in the sense that we do at our weekly worship service. It was rather an act of fear because they realized that they were in trouble and had come to plead for mercy. Clearly they recognized Jesus for who he truly was - the Son of God. Verse 7 records them addressing Jesus as the Son of the Most High God. And so these demons, in their story, are confronted by Jesus and acknowledge his authority and status.

The result is that they begin to beg of Jesus. They make two related requests of Jesus in verses 10 and 12. In verse 10, they beg that they will not be sent out of the area, and in verse 12 they beg that they could be allowed to enter the pigs. Why did they want to remain in the area and enter the pigs? The text doesn't tell us explicitly. Maybe they thought the area, a place of pagan Gentiles, was a more effective place to wreak their destruction than, say, Judea or Galilee where God's Word was being regularly taught among the people. Or maybe the demons were concerned that they would be sent to the place described in Revelation as the

abyss, a place as a bottomless pit where they would be bound from deceiving the nations. Or maybe they were concerned that Jesus would cast them into the eternal lake of fire before the appointed time. Or maybe they thought that if they were allowed to go into the pigs that they could try to thwart Jesus' ministry.

We don't know for certain what the reasoning of the demons was. We do know that though they recognized Jesus' authority and status, and were even afraid of him, they were not looking to glorify him and serve him. Instead, as soon as Jesus permits them to go to the swine, they kill the pigs, all 2,000 of them, drowning them in the sea. This, of course, shows the real intention of the demons. They were out to destroy. They were out to cause destruction to God's creation. They had been doing that to the man already - causing him to gnash rocks against his flesh. And they continue to do that with the pigs.

Of course, for these demons known as Legion, their fate had already been sealed. Their rebellion against God had already happened, and as far as we know, there is no plan of salvation for these demons. Their doom is imminent. Their appointed time for their destruction has been set. Their exorcism by Jesus was yet another symbol of Christ's work of conquest. Christ's ministry in saving us included a plan to conquer Satan on the cross. And so these demons' days are numbered. They were exorcised here. At the cross, Jesus dealt a decisive blow to them. The lake of fire draws ever closer. And so the story of these demons in this passage reminds us that Jesus, the all powerful Son of God, has come to set us free from the destructive power and bondage of Satan and his demons. As these demons are exorcised, liberty and freedom is proclaimed in Christ!

And so that's the story of the demons in our passage; let's look now at the story of the townspeople. The people in this area, as I already described, would have been largely Gentiles. Most would have been foreigners to God's covenants, involved in various pagan cults, not worshipping the one true God. Most would not have been looking for the Messiah to come, nor would they probably have even known much about the prophecies in Scripture about the Messiah. At that time, there was much hostility between the Jews and Gentiles, so whatever they did know about the Jews, most would probably not have cared to learn anything more about their God. It's quite possible that's why they had such a large herd of pigs right on the coast of the sea that separated them from the Jewish cities. Maybe it was their way of telling the Jews to stay away.

In our passage, we learn about some of these townspeople before they actually come onto the scene. Verse 4 talks about how the demon-possessed man had been bound many times, but no one was able to tame him. It seems fair to conclude that at least some of the townspeople were the ones who had tried unsuccessfully to bind this man. In fact, the way that the description is worded in verses 3-4 suggests that this man's plight was common knowledge in the area. In other words, all we're told about the townspeople before they enter into this story is that they were aware of this man's plight, but the only thing that's reported as being tried is the attempt to bind the man. Of course, binding the man would help protect themselves from the man, but wouldn't have done much to help the man.

That's actually important background to these townspeople, because as the rest of the story unfolds, an increasing lack of compassion is seen on their part. They seem more concerned about the loss of the pigs and their own well being, than in the well being of this man who was demon-possessed. And so it seems that materialism ruled in their hearts more than compassion.

We see Jesus using the situation with the pigs and this man to challenge these townspeople. You see, people often wonder about why Jesus let the demons enter the

pigs, when surely it would mean the destruction of the pigs. People often question why Jesus would allow these demons to commit this destruction. But that's the key word: "allow". Verse 15 says that Jesus gave the demons permission to enter the pigs. We know that God sometimes allows his creatures to do bad things. He allowed man to sin in the garden. He permits men and demons to continue to do bad things. The cross is an example of that - God permitted Satan to tempt Judas into betraying Jesus. God permitted man to murder the innocent Jesus. God permits and allows evil things to happen. God is certainly not the author of this evil, but he sometimes allows the creatures who he created with free will to do evil things. But even when God allows evil to happen, it is all within his control. And as we look at history, we see time and time again how God takes the evil that is done by others and uses it for his glory. For example, Satan used Judas to betray Jesus, resulting on the cross, but it was on the cross that God claimed victory over Satan.

I think the same is true here. Jesus permitted the demons to destroy the pigs, but this destruction is in turn used for good. For Jesus uses the destruction of the pigs to challenge the townspeople. Here the townspeople are confronted with an obvious display of power. Jesus was able to not only bind, but even heal, this man whom none of them could help. The man who was probably seen as crazy or insane was here sitting in his right mind, subdued before Jesus. How would the townspeople respond? Would they be more amazed at the healing of this man in need or would they be more concerned about the loss of their material things? What would their response be?

Well, the first response we see in the text is an obvious one. They are afraid. Their response is reminiscent of the last event in Mark, where Jesus calms the storm. After Jesus calms the storm, the disciples become terribly afraid, wondering who this man Jesus was who could calm the wind and sea. And here the townspeople, after hearing about the man's healing and the pigs, become frightened, according to verse 15.

But notice their next response in verse 17. They too beg of Jesus. They beg him to leave. This is an interesting response. Verse 16 emphasizes that it is not only the man's healing which is recounted by the witnesses, but also what happened to the pigs. It seems that the loss of these 2,000 pigs stood out and influenced their response to beg Jesus to leave. Think about it. This man who had been terribly afflicted, beyond anyone's control had been miraculously healed. Yet there is no description here about the townspeople embracing him. You might think that the event might cause the townspeople to at least kneel down before Jesus in honor - even the demons did that. In other places, Jesus' miracles and exorcisms sparked a response of people bringing all their sick and afflicted to Jesus.

Wouldn't that have been a better response by the townspeople? If they saw how Jesus healed this man so amazingly, wouldn't you out of compassion want to bring others to him to be healed? Wouldn't you want others to be helped? Wouldn't compassion demand that? And yet, the incident with the pigs stood out to everyone. It's very likely that the herdsmen were not the owners of these pigs, but maybe many of the townspeople were. The destruction of 2000 pigs would have cost some people some serious money. And yet, wouldn't it be worth it?

If you were terminally ill and there was a wonder drug that had no side effects and promised a full cure - even if it cost a large sum of money, wouldn't you do whatever it took to acquire this drug? You'd maybe go to friends and family asking for help, and certainly, you would hope, many of them, out pure human compassion, would give of their wealth to help you with this cure.

But that doesn't seem to have happened with these townspeople. No more sick are brought to Jesus. Instead he is asked to leave. Evidently, they couldn't risk any more loss of their wealth, even to heal the afflicted. For the townspeople, it seemed materialism had won over compassion. For them, they needed freedom and liberty, not from demons, but from the lusts of earthly wealth. Jesus allowing of the pigs to be destroyed by the demons allows for this challenge to be brought front and center to them. They were confronted with their sin and need to be set free, but instead of begging Jesus to set them free, they beg him to leave.

And so now, lastly, let's look at the story of this demon-possessed man. Of course, the other two stories, the perspectives of the demons and townspeople are intimately connected with this demon-possessed man, but I'd like to look a little more closely on the freedom that Jesus brings to this man. And I'd like to point out, as we think about this freedom that Jesus gives here, that it seems most likely that this man was a Gentile. I hope you'll see the significance of that.

And so let's look at his state when Jesus arrives. Verse 2 records that he was possessed by an unclean spirit. Later in the story we find that he actually has a large number of unclean spirits, referred collectively to as Legion. Of course, this was a word used in the armies of the Roman Empire to refer to a force of some 6000 soldiers. The point is that this single man was possessed by a horde of demons. Verses 3-4 record that this possession gave the man unnatural strength, somehow breaking shackles and chains, with no one able to subdue him. According to verse 3, he lived in tombs, which symbolized his state - he was as good as dead in his current condition. It says that he was screaming night and day, and cutting himself with stones all the time! Verse 15 implies that he was naked, and that is confirmed in the Luke account of this story.

But look at the transformation. Look at the awesome freedom that Jesus brought this man. Look at how wonderfully Jesus set this man free from the afflictions of the devil. Verse 15, "Then they came to Jesus, and saw the one who had been demon-possessed and had the legion, sitting and clothed and in his right mind." The demons had been cast out. The man was now clothed and no longer naked. He was not running around screaming and cutting himself, but sat still before his new master, Jesus.

What then is this man's response? He too begs of Jesus in verse 18. But he does not beg to stay in the area, as did the demons. He did not beg Jesus to leave, as the townspeople did. Instead, he begs Jesus that he might go with him. Actually, verse 15 literally says, that he "he might *be with* him. That language seems to refer to discipleship. Earlier in Mark, when Jesus appointed the 12 disciples, one of the things he appointed them to, was to "be with" Jesus. Here this healed man wants to be with Jesus. In other words, this man is begging Jesus that he could become his disciple. He wanted to follow Jesus as the other 12 disciples were doing.

What's Jesus response to this man? He actually says "no." Jesus has other plans for this man. He was not to be one of his inner-circle of disciples. Instead, he was to be a missionary. He was to go and tell others, even other gentiles, of what the *Lord* had done for him. And of course, the man understood this to refer to Jesus - for he went around telling everyone about what *Jesus* had done for him. It says that he spread this news throughout the Decapolis. Remember, this was a Gentile region. He spread the news of the freedom he had found in Jesus to a land of Gentiles. And the result of his testimony is that people were amazed and marveled at this news. This man was one of the first missionaries to the Gentiles!

And that's exactly what we have seen in this passage today. The story of the demons, and the story of the townspeople, and the story of this demon-possessed man, all testify to the fact that the gospel of freedom had come to the Gentiles. Though Jesus had escaped to the other side the sea to find some rest and relaxation, what he ultimately found was more ministry. This event in Mark is another foreshadowing of how the gospel would be ultimately sent out to all the nations.

On a similar note, I think it is amazing how this miracle among the Gentiles had some important similarities with Jesus regular ministry, but also some differences. In Mark, we see Jesus regularly performing exorcisms. They were a sign of the coming kingdom - a kingdom that came with power over Satan. Here he shows that sign among the Gentiles. Jesus showed among the Jews that he had come to conquer Satan, and he shows that here among the Gentiles as well. Jesus showed compassion among the Jews, here he shows it among the Gentiles. As he did miracles among the Jews, news went out about his miracles and people were amazed. Here word of his miracle goes forth throughout the Decapolis, and again people are amazed. And so Jesus' work among the Gentiles shows connection with his ministry among the Jews.

However, there are two related things that are a bit different from the normal circumstances of his ministry. First, normally when Jesus casts out demons, Mark goes out of his way to state that Jesus silenced them, so that they didn't reveal that he was the Son of God to others. Here, the legion of demons announce that he is the Son of God, but there is no record of Jesus silencing them. Second, similarly, we've seen and will see in Mark that Jesus often tells the people that he healed to *not* tell anyone about the miracle. Yet, here, Jesus does not order this man to silence, but instead commands him to go tell everyone he knows. Why is that? Why is there less concern by Jesus here to protect how his identity is made known? We'll the text doesn't tell us. It's possible that among the Gentiles there would be less concern that the people might have a false, pre-conceived, notion of who the Messiah is to be.

And so the point is that Jesus is ministering even to the Gentiles. The fact that this had so many similarities with Jesus normal ministry, showed that fundamentally the gospel was going out to all: Jew and Gentile. The fact that there was some difference in how Jesus was ministering to the Gentiles here, only highlights the fact that this is something new and exciting. It was too small of a thing for Christ to only bring freedom to the Jews. The kingdom message of liberty and freedom in Christ was coming even to the Gentiles. Even here he is beginning the work of binding the strong man. Even among the Gentiles, God's mercy is being found. This ultimately looks forward to the Great Commission when Jesus would send out his disciples to the ends of the earth, to every tongue, tribe, and nation. The good news of the kingdom was not to remain with the Jews, but would go forth to all people groups. That reality is pictured here today in this passage, through the freedom from Satan given to this man.

Saints of God, I would like to end our sermon today with three brief points of application from this text. First, we have a message of freedom and reconciliation to give to the world. Christ has given us freedom from Satan. He has given us freedom from materialism. He has given us a freedom that is to be offered to all: both Jew and Gentile. We must proclaim this freedom. As the church, we are ambassadors of this freedom to the world.

The second point of application: This freedom is a freedom that should lead to compassion. How can we look at Christ's transforming work in others, and be more concerned about our material losses and inconveniences? We must not be like the townspeople, more concerned with our own earthly well being, than the fact that

people all around us are dying, afflicted by Satan and sin, while we know of a cure! Instead, we should have a heart of compassion. That should trump our material concerns. That means that we must be willing to make sacrifices for the sake of bringing this message of freedom in Christ to the world. What sacrifices have you made for the sake of the gospel? What sacrifices are you willing to make? Pray that the Lord would soften your hearts to cheerfully serve Christ, even if it involves sacrifice.

The third point of application: Pray for God to use you, but be open to what that means. Pray, even beg, that God would use you in bringing this message of freedom to the world. But remember that God doesn't always answer our prayers the way we might expect. Look at the three groups that begged of Jesus today. The first two requests were not the best requests: the demons begged to go to the pigs; the townspeople begged Jesus to leave. These were not the best requests, yet Jesus in his providence, permitted their requests. And amidst the bad desires of the demons and the townspeople, God was still glorified. Yet the third request, that the healed man begged to be with Jesus, that was actually a good request. It was a noble one. Yet, that was the only request that Jesus did not permit here. He said "No, I have another plan for you." "I have something better in store for you." You see, when we pray, even for seemingly good things, sometimes God says "no." Sometimes God has something better in store for you. So, as you pray to be used in spreading the gospel, be open-minded on how God might answer that prayer. Sometimes God answers our prayers in ways we don't expect.

And so in closing, let us all look forward to the day when Satan will be fully vanquished. On that day our liberty will be fully realized. Then we will be "with Jesus" for all eternity: Liberated Jews and Gentiles worshipping God together, forever. Amen.

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