

June 23, 2019

Luke 8: 26-37

Prayer: Dear Lord, We come into your presence on this Lord's Day, carrying the doubts and fears and hurts of our week. Help us to lay them down, Lord. Help us to experience joy as your children. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

A Legion of Fears

Vince and I went to a funeral this spring for the son of an old *Greenville News* colleague.

Our friend's only child had died of cancer at 40.

It was a lovely service with many of the man's boyhood friends standing up to talk about him. And then another friend pulled out his guitar and sang to the man's parents, his wife and his young daughter.

It's knowing that this can't go on forever

Likely one of us will have to spend some days alone

Maybe we'll get 40 years together

But one day I'll be gone

Or one day you'll be gone.

Of course, that's Jason Isbell and the 400 Unit, who quickly became one of my favorite bands. I went home and bought tickets for their concert at the Peace Center in August. I put them on the playlist that I turn on almost every night on our backyard deck. And I searched out all their other songs.

One of the most powerful is called *Anxiety*.

Jason Isbell is at the very top of his game, creatively, artistically, financially.

Yet this is what he sings:

Anxiety, how do you always get the best of me?

I'm out here living in a fantasy

I can't enjoy a (expletive) thing

Anxiety, why am I never where I am supposed to be?

Even with my lover sleeping close to me

I'm wide awake and I'm in pain.

Now I know that it's as dangerous to assume a personal narrative for a songwriter as it is a novelist. Still, there's some knowledge in those lyrics.

Anxiety, I think, is another word for fear. Maybe a more modern manifestation of fear.

Heaven knows there's cause for fear. Wildfires that are eating up entire towns as temperatures rise.

Deserted ocean islands polluted with plastic, and dead zones in the ocean created by nutrient run-off.

The epic floods that our friends in the Midwest have been dealing with this winter.

And if you have watched the HBO series "Chernobyl," a renewed fear of nuclear disasters and meltdowns and radiation.

Closer to home, family members or friends struggle with seemingly unassailable addictions. We fear failure on the job. We fear poverty. We fear eviction and homelessness.

And those very real fears are not even what Jason Isbell is singing about. He's singing about free-floating anxiety that may be the most excruciating fear of all. Because there's nothing causing it. There's nothing but our own inner demons at work.

We are riddled with anxiety that we are not where we are supposed to be, we are not doing what we are supposed to be doing, we are somehow not living the lives we are capable of. What an awful way to live.

In the ancient world in which our Holy Scriptures are set, thought patterns were a little different. They were un-scientific. So fear was real enough, but it was often directed at angry gods or troublesome demons.

If a formerly healthy tree in your yard inexplicably withered and died, you would likely think a demon had attacked it. You wouldn't think that lack of a certain nutrient or a pest had killed it.

Jesus was born into that ancient culture. And so it's not surprising that we find today's Scripture passage about a demoniac in the gospel of Luke.

Reading it through the lens of modernity, we're not sure what was going on. Was the man mentally ill? He sure sounds like people we have seen here.

Or was this more a method of storytelling for Luke, to make a point about Jesus's control over every part of his world? Earlier in the gospel, Jesus has exorcised demons, healed paralysis and hemorrhage, raised a man from the dead and calmed a storm. Luke is showing his control over all creation.

And now we come to this familiar story. Please turn to **Luke 8: 26-37**.

Then (Jesus and the disciples) arrived at the country of the Gerasenes, which is opposite Galilee. As he stepped out on land, a man of the city who had demons

met him. For a long time he had worn no clothes, and he did not live in a house but in the tombs.

When he saw Jesus, he fell down before him and shouted at the top of his voice, 'What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I beg you, do not torment me' — for Jesus had commanded the unclean spirit to come out of the man. (For many times it had seized him; he was kept under guard and bound with chains and shackles, but he would break the bonds and be driven by the demon into the wilds.)

Jesus then asked him, 'What is your name?' He said, 'Legion'; for many demons had entered him. They begged him not to order them to go back into the abyss.

Now there on the hillside, a large herd of swine was feeding; and the demons begged Jesus to let them enter these. So he gave them permission. Then the demons came out of the man and entered the swine, and the herd rushed down the steep bank into the lake and was drowned.

When the swineherds saw what had happened, they ran off and told it in the city and in the country. Then people came out to see what had happened, and when they came to Jesus, they found the man from whom the demons had gone sitting at the feet of Jesus, clothed and in his right mind. *And they were afraid.*

Those who had seen it told them how the one who had been possessed by demons had been healed. Then all the people of the surrounding country of the Gerasenes asked Jesus to leave them; for they were *seized with great fear.*

This is why I say we must approach Scripture with humility. There are people who will assure you they know exactly what is going on in this passage, and they may. I'm not going to fight them on it. But *I'm* not sure exactly how we are to interpret this story.

For one thing, our gospel writers tell us it occurred in different places. Luke says it was the country of the Gerasenes. Matthew says it was the country of the Gadarenes. That is not an alternative spelling. Those are two different places. Matthew also says there were two demoniacs. Mark and Luke tell only of one.

Humility.

But in this story set in an unscientific world, a world of supernatural demons, there is something very human going on.

When the people saw that their demon-possessed neighbor was healed, *they were afraid.*

They begged Jesus to leave their area *for they were seized with great fear.*

In the face of this miraculous healing, their reaction was ... *fear.*

What were they afraid of? Presumably this neighbor of theirs had lived for years by himself among the tombs of the dead, naked and screaming. They had to

keep him under guard and bound by chains and shackles. Yet he still broke free and ran into the wilds.

Now *that* sounds scary to me.

A woman who knows good and well that a man is going to hit her, slap her, beat her, bruise her – now that's scary. But apparently not as scary as leaving.

A man who knows good and well that his addiction is going to cost him his job, his wife, his children, his home, his dignity – now that's scary. But apparently not as scary as putting down that bottle, laying down that crack pipe.

The thought of wildfires that can swallow towns and ice caps that are melting and swamping our beach communities – now that's scary. But apparently not as scary as admitting that our arrogance and our greed and our over-consumption have caused global warming.

The people of Gerasenes were willing to live with the devils they knew – quite literally. They were willing to post guards and chain and shackle their neighbor to keep him from hurting someone.

What they were not willing to accept was the frightening power that could cure him. What scared them was a power so fierce it could free a man.

In fact, they were so frightened of Jesus' power that they asked him to leave. Or, perhaps more understandably, they were so afraid of losing their pigs that they asked him to leave.

This is an incredible story for it says so much about our human short-sightedness. We would rather cripple ourselves with guards and chains and shackles than risk freedom.

What healing is fear preventing in our lives?

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I wonder if Luke was also making a bit of a political statement in this passage. Jesus asks the possessed man his name. ***He said, 'Legion'; for many demons had entered him.*** And indeed, in our vocabulary, legion has come to mean a crowd or throng or multitude.

But the word referred to a legion of Roman soldiers. That was 6,000 soldiers and 6,000 support troops. So Luke was raising the specter of military occupation, of political occupation.

Yes, there may have been 12,000 demons, but Luke was linking their occupation of this man to the Roman Empire's occupation of Palestine. And so if

Jesus had power over the occupying demons, he had power over the occupying Roman Empire.

That was a fiery, fearsome idea for Luke to broach.

I mentioned the series “Chernobyl” on HBO. Chernobyl was the nuclear reactor in the Ukraine and Belarus that exploded in April 1986. This was before the Soviet Union disintegrated, and there was enormous pressure from the state to underplay the danger and cover it up. Only when news got out worldwide that ash was falling on its European neighbors did the USSR begin to evacuate the city right around the plant.

They’d rather face the risk of radiation burns and cancer and contaminated water than admit that their nuclear building systems had a flaw.

You never know how much of a screenplay is factual because the writers needed heroes and villains to create a storyline. But in this telling, the Kremlin sent an obedient Cabinet member to work with a top scientist to clean up the site.

This Cabinet minister was initially resistant to what the scientist told him. But he soon realized the incredible danger and procured all the equipment and soldiers that the scientist requested.

Near the end, the Cabinet minister was given a year to live because anyone working near the power plant had been exposed to terrible radiation. And he apologized to the scientist for how little he'd been able to do.

And the scientist said, in essence, *Are you kidding? They mistakenly sent the one good man in government. You saved millions of lives.*

We may not be suffering the effects of Chernobyl today because a few people in the Soviet Union got past their fear.

What healing is fear preventing in our lives?

In Luke's story, fear shows up only after the exorcism, after the healing.

When the people came out to see what the swineherders had reported, they found the man **“sitting at the feet of Jesus, clothed and in his right mind.”** Only then were they afraid.

Witnesses told them how Jesus had healed the man. Only then were they **“seized with great fear.”**

Whether it was the fearsome power of Jesus, or the economic loss of those pigs, or the very idea of change, something in the healing scared the townspeople. Something about healing scares us.

Think about the fear that keeps someone in addiction.

Think about the fear that keeps someone in an abusive relationship.

Think about the fear that keeps someone from admitting she was wrong.

You know, I think we have taken a lot of wrong turns in our experiment with Christianity. But perhaps nothing has been more insidious than making it a religion of rules, of do's and don'ts.

No dancing. No cards. No drinking. Everything from ridiculous regulations to good advice was thrown into the mix.

Early Christians were called simply followers of The Way. Indeed, that's what it was. Following Jesus was a new Way of living. A Way that encompassed radical love of our neighbor.

But Jesus did not come to create more rules and more barriers. He came to eliminate them. He came to free men living among the tombs in chains and shackles, even if the man's neighbors couldn't understand it.

It is easy to retreat to rules and regulations, to do's and don'ts. It is easier to remain in small lives filled with pain rather than to step into lives marked by freedom and the unknown. It is sometimes easier to accept chains and shackles than to imagine a life without them.

That is how some cities deal with homelessness. They manage it. They hide it. They push it to areas where they don't have to look at it.

That's why I feel so privileged to minister in this place. People come to Triune, knowing they are going to see homelessness, knowing they're going to face it up close. They come anyway.

The people who come into this sanctuary, the volunteers who work here, are choosing to confront homelessness in Greenville. Choosing to stand alongside, to walk alongside, to love alongside those who are experiencing it.

But those who are living without homes due to addiction must face that as well. This is not simply society's problem. It is an individual problem, too.

And someone who chooses to live in addiction rather than call on the power of Jesus to end it, rather than to seek help from drug rehabilitation or Narcotics Anonymous or Alcoholics Anonymous, is like a citizen of Gerasenes who simply tells Jesus to leave.

It is easier to make him leave than to consider what his healing might entail.

But make no mistake: It is a choice.

On a hillside in Gerasenes, a man who once thrashed in chains and shackles, whose demons ran him into the wilds, finally sat quietly **“at the feet of Jesus, clothed and in his right mind.”**

That is as possible today as it was then.

Amen.