

Journey to the Cross I: Jesus And The Demon-Possessed Man

The Christian author, John Killinger, tells a moving story about an American who is all-alone in a hotel room in Canada. The man is in a state of deep depression. He is so depressed that he can't even bring himself to go downstairs to the restaurant to eat.

He is a powerful man usually the chairman of a large shipping company... but at this moment, he is absolutely overwhelmed by the pressures and demands of life... and he lies there on a lonely hotel bed far from home wallowing in self-pity.

All of his life, he has been fastidious... worrying about everything, anxious and fretful, always fussing and stewing over every detail. And now, at mid-life, his anxiety has gotten the best of him, even to the extent that it is difficult for him to sleep and to eat.

He worries and broods and agonizes about everything... his business, his investments, his decisions, his family, his health, even, his dogs. Then, on this day in a Canadian hotel, he craters... he hits bottom. Filled with anxiety, completely immobilized, paralyzed by his emotional despair, unable to leave his room, lying on his bed, he moans out loud: "Life isn't worth living this way, I wish I were dead!"

And then, he wonders, what God would think if he heard him talking this way. Speaking aloud again he says, "God, it's a joke, isn't it? Life is nothing but a joke."

Suddenly, it occurs to the man that this is the first time he's talked to God since he was a little boy. He is silent for a moment and then he begins to pray. He describes it like this:

"I just talked out loud about what a mess my life was in... and how tired I was... and how much I wanted things to be different in my life. And you know what happened next? A voice!! I heard a voice say, 'It doesn't have to be that way!' That's all."

I sat straight up and turned around... I laughed at myself. I thought I must be hearing things. But then I was absolutely certain that I had heard those words: 'It doesn't have to be that way!'

He went home and talked to his wife about what happened. He talked to his brother who is a minister and asked him: "Do you think it was God speaking to me?"

The brother said: "Of course, because that is the message of God to you and everyone of us. That's the message of the Bible. That's why Jesus Christ came into the world to save us, to deliver us, to free us, to change us... and to show us that 'It doesn't have to be that way,' ... You don't have to be anxious or depressed or selfish or hopeless. Jesus Christ can turn your life around. If you will welcome Him into your heart and cooperate with him he will make you a new person."

That is precisely what this story in Mark 5 is all about. Christ walks into the tormented life of the Gerasene demoniac, this madman, whose life is coming apart at the seams... and He turns it around for him. He gives him a new beginning... a new start... a new birth.

At the beginning of the narrative, it sounds like a horror-story. This wild-eyed, adrenalin-filled, madman comes running and shrieking out of the tomb. He is so unbalanced! He is convinced that he is being held captive by a whole legion of demons, who are pulling and jerking him in every direction.

Think about this man's life and compare it with the life of many people today. Many people spend their lives doing things they don't want to do because they cram other people's idea of how they are to live into their lives. They meet everyone else's expectations but their own and are also held captive by a whole legion of demons pulling and jerking them in every direction. But you know, it doesn't have to be this way.

Like the Gerasene demoniac, and the man John Killinger's profiles in his biographical vignette a marked change for the better can be made. Think with me for a minute longer about the man in Mark 5. Forces outside himself had taken over and he didn't know who he was. In fact he cannot even speak for himself, for when Jesus asks "What is your name?" he replies by saying "My name is Legion," for we are many. The madman said his name was Legion. That's a military word... and so appropriate in this case because this man was at war. He was at war with himself. He was at war with other people. He was at war with God. But then Jesus walked into his life and in essence He said to him: "It doesn't have to be that way!"

Is this the message we need to hear today? Do you know what it is like to be this man. So many people have tried to tell you who you are or you have looked to others to tell you who you are that you don't even know who you are any more? Is there something in your life right now that needs to be changed? Do you feel like Legion? Do you feel like you are being pushed and pulled and jerked and yanked in so many different directions that you are out of control? Do you feel like your life is out of balance? Out of sync? Out of sorts? Out of step? Do you feel that you are constantly doing battle

with everybody you meet? That life is a war... and that it is overwhelming you and ripping you apart? Do you feel worn and tired and rejected?

Look down now to verse 15 where Mark tells us "When they came to Jesus, they saw the man who had been possessed by the legion of demons, sitting there, dressed and in his right mind." What a wonderful verse of scripture. A life that was controlled by a legion of demons becomes a life where this man was learning to live from the inside out. He now knew his name, knew who he was. How did this change happen? This man learned that he 1. Didn't have to be at war with himself; 2. He didn't have to be at war with other people, 3. He didn't have to be at war with God.

1. First of All...You Don't Have To Be At War With Yourself.

Notice here in Mark 5 that the Gerasene demoniac, this madman, was at war with himself. At verse 4 we read: "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. 5 Night and day among the tombs and on the mountains he was always howling and bruising himself with stones." How often do we do that, if not physically, emotionally and spiritually?

One day a young father was shopping in a crowded super-market. His three-year old son was with him. The little boy was riding in the grocery cart... and he was misbehaving terribly and causing all kinds of problems.

Every time the father would put something into the cart, the little boy would grab it and throw it back out. If the cart went close to the shelves, the three-year old boy would just rake stuff off onto the floor. At one point, the little boy crawled out of the cart and ran down the aisle (knocking over every display he could get his hands on) with his father in hot pursuit.

People who were in the store at the time could hear the father saying out loud over and over, "Just be patient, Tommy. It won't be much longer Tommy. It'll be O.K., Tommy. Be calm, Tommy. Hang in there, Tommy."

Finally, a distinguished looking woman came up to the man and she said: "I just want to compliment you. I've been watching you and I want you to know that I admire you and the remarkable patience you have with little Tommy."

"O, but Lady," the man said. "You don't understand." His name is Michael. I'm Tommy!!!"

Well, that's a smart man! He was right to start with himself. If we are going to set a problem right, we have to get ourselves set right first.

When you are at war with yourself, it smudges and distorts every relationship. On the other hand, when we are able to accept who we are, honestly knowing our weaknesses and strengths we become more loving, more patient, more thoughtful, more gracious... toward everyone we see.

Do you want to accept yourself? Do you want to like yourself more? Do you want to stop bruising and hurting yourself? Do you want to be at peace within? Then remember this: "You are special to God. He loves you! You are extremely valuable to Him! He claims you as His child! When we come to know this then we can be more authentic to be with ourselves.

II. Second, You Don't Have To Be At War With Other People.

It doesn't have to be that way...

In Mark 5, Legion, the madman, was very much at war with other people. He had been cast out of society... chained, shackled, exiled to the tombs, constantly doing battle with other people... here in this story he runs out toward Jesus and His disciples looking for a fight. Isn't it amazing how estranged and hostile people can get?

I was talking to my brother on the phone last night. He is the principal of a middle school in Ontario. One of the things they are doing is putting into place a no bullying policy. He observed that the bullying isn't just between students but also some parents when they call the school can be very aggressive and rude. My brother said that when he gets such a parent on the phone he has started to say to them, you are trying to bully me and this is unacceptable. Until you are willing to talk to me in a manner that is respectful, this conversation is over. Please call me back when you are ready to talk reasonably." He is also teaching his staff to use this same method.

Friends, we don't need to be at war with other people.

III. Third and Finally, You Don't Have To Be At War With God...

It doesn't have to be that way.

In Mark 5, Legion, the madman, is also cut off from God. "What have you to do with me?... don't torment me," he says to Jesus.

Carl Michalson, a brilliant young theologian who died in a plane crash in 1966, once told about playing with his young son one afternoon. They were tussling playfully on their front lawn when Dr. Michalson accidentally hit the young boy in the face with his elbow. It was a sharp blow full to his son's face. The little boy was stunned by the impact of the elbow. It hurt... and he was just about to burst into tears. But then, he looked into his father's eyes.

Instead of anger or hostility, he saw there his father's sympathy and concern; he saw there his father's love and compassion. Then, instead of exploding into tears, the little boy suddenly burst into laughter. What he saw in his father's eyes... made all the difference!

This is one of the reasons Jesus is so important to us. He lets us look into the Father's eyes! When we look at Jesus we see what God is like and what God wants us to be like!

Jesus shows us the love, the compassion, the concern and the empathy in the Father's eyes... and that's the good news of our faith. Jesus reveals that God looks at us not with angry, vengeful, condemning eyes, but with the eyes of love.

So, we don't have to be at war with ourselves, we don't have to be at war with other people, we don't have to be at war with God. Jesus comes into our lives, just as He came into Legion's life, saying: "It doesn't have to that way!"