

### **“Telling the Story” – Luke 8:26-39 – June 20, 2004**

Isn't this story of the Gerasene pigs one of the weirdest stories you've ever heard? Most people, including those whose latest contact with the church has not been very recent, at least know of this story although they couldn't relate many of the details. Even those of us who have read it as recently as a few minutes ago would be hard pressed to relate all of the details, mostly because it's such a weird story that you cannot wrap your mind around it easily. Most of us have a bit of a strange reaction to this story, and that's ok, because it is a story about strange reactions.

It opens innocently enough, with a scene that would be familiar enough to us on the coast. A boatload of people arrives at the shore. There's no detailed description of the weather, but it seems like it was a fairly fine day at the beach – no incident docking the boat, pigs are out grubbing in the dirt for treats as pigs enjoy doing – it's Gentile territory, after all, so no surprise at there being pigs. A few swineherders are looking after them, although it's a bit surprising that anyone then thought that pigs can be herded – they're a bit more difficult to herd than cats!

But it wasn't long before the surprises began to pile up. Almost immediately after Jesus and the gang stepped out of the boat, they are met by one really surprising dude. This man is the ultimate “dumpster diver” – hasn't worn clothes in years, lives in the cemetery, you get the picture. And his behaviour matches his appearance. Instead of just merely harassing the arriving tourists like any normal squeegee person would do, he falls down on the ground shouting at the top of his voice. Get the picture? It's chaos, untidy, messy, repulsive – the kind of incident people in the city would instinctively avoid, like walking well clear of a gathering of the shopping-cart crowd in the laneway. I'm sure the reactions of the disciples were not surprising, moving to avoid any contact with this weird man.

But then comes the next big surprise. Instead of accosting the disembarking passengers from the ferry for spare change, the man cries out identifying Jesus by name and title. “Aha!”, they think, “now we are not surprised, for this man has a demon and it is the demon speaking!” It had to be a demon, because with demons there is always the naming at the beginning of a confrontation, and this demon not only knew Jesus by name, but acknowledged him as the Son of the Most High God, and begged him to be left alone. Surprisingly, it appears that it was not only a demon but a whole demon colony, and we are hearing the spokes-demon, and they had even given themselves a group identity, calling themselves “Legion” when Jesus asked. The sequence of events in this initial meeting is a bit surprising, or at least a bit cloudy, as it's unclear as to whether Jesus had commanded the demons to come out before he knew their name, which would be a surprising departure from a ‘normal’ exorcism – perhaps Luke wanted us to understand that Jesus had more than ordinary power over demons, which would be no surprise.

In any event, the demons begged Jesus not to be sent back into the abyss, into the eternal prison, which was not surprising, but their request to relocate into the piggies was, and remains, a huge surprise. But the surprises didn't stop there, did they? Now the demon-infested herd of pigs goes thundering down the slope, into the water, and drowns. What could the demons have been thinking? Did they think that the power of Jesus didn't reach into the depths of the water (the Jews considered the sea to be a creepy and dangerous place – monsters lived in there!)? If so, those demons were in for a huge surprise!

Not surprisingly, the poor swineherds (just doesn't have the same ring to it as ‘shepherds’, does it?) ran off and told it in the city and in the country – I guess they would have. It's not too hard to picture them running away, jabbering at each other and at anyone who would listen. All of this must have happened fairly early in the morning, because all the people of the surrounding country came out

to see what had happened, and since it was over thirty kilometers to the city some considerable time had to elapse before the swineherds could get into the city with the news and the people could return.

This is where the second biggest surprise of the story occurs – the people who heard about these strange doings arrived to find the weird man no longer weird – the demons are gone, he is in his right mind, sitting calmly and quietly at the feet of Jesus, now fully clothed and as normal as anyone could expect. A huge surprise for the people who had spent years vainly trying to chain him up, pen him up, keep him locked away to now see him fully healed. “They were afraid”, the text tells us simply. They were afraid – a not too surprising reaction. All their efforts had not been enough to manage and control this problem, and here this Jewish stranger from across the water had, with a word, demonstrated a power the Gerasenes could barely understand. That kind of power, a power over even the forces of evil and disruption is truly frightening, and they were afraid. Instead of rejoicing, instead of giving thanks for the problem of the weird man, with which they had wrestled for years, being solved, instead of welcoming this powerful stranger who could heal with a word, they asked Jesus and his gang to leave.

It was a reaction that would be repeated a few years later as Paul attempted to tell the story of this Jesus of Nazareth, the Messiah, the one who brought redemption with a word. These Gentiles asked Jesus and his followers to leave, just as other Gentiles would a few years later ask Paul and other followers also to leave.

But perhaps the reaction of the Gerasenes wasn’t too surprising when we think about it. Jesus had a profound and somewhat negative impact upon their lives. The loss of a herd of swine was a significant economic blow to the area – just ask any farmer who’s dealing with the consequences of either the ‘mad cow’ or the ‘bird flu’ episodes. If he could affect their lives so drastically without hardly getting off the dock, what kind of impact would he have on the rest of their lives?

We face the same kind of reaction today. People are fearful when being confronted by the power of Jesus at work, even though his power is a power to heal, to reconcile, to drive out all sorts of demons, to bring us back to normal, to calm us, to clothe us, to restore us. People are more than a bit nervous to let this kind of power get too close to them, for fear that they cannot handle the changes, that their comfortable existence that they have carefully built up will be challenged, or worse yet set tumbling over the cliff into the sea. I think that if we are honest with ourselves we will acknowledge that we share the same reaction, that we too are more than a bit nervous about letting the awesome power of Jesus get too close or too involved in our lives.

The reaction of the healed man wasn’t too surprising, though. He wanted to continue with Jesus. It doesn’t take too much imagination to understand that he would be a bit nervous dealing with the people who had to deal with him for so many years. The reactions of those people would naturally range from dismissal (“that’s just that crazy guy from the cemetery – ignore him”) to retribution (“there’s that guy who stole from my garden – let’s get him”). He would be crazy to stay in that area. But that’s exactly what Jesus asked of him – “return to your home, and declare how much God has done for you”, Jesus told him. And to his credit, the man did just that. Well, with one exception, and that exception is the point of the whole story. The man went away, proclaiming throughout the city how much Jesus had done for him. The connection is made, the story is complete. The message is clear, that God had done so much for him, and it was through Jesus that God had acted. The connection is now clear that the demons were truly right, that Jesus was, and is, indeed the Son of the Most High God.

That of course is the point of this story. It’s not about pigs, or swineherds, or ungrateful townspeople, or even about demons. It is a story about the magnificent power of God at work in Jesus. It is a story about Jesus being truly the Son of God, the redeemer, the Messiah, the Christ. It is a story

that Jesus is not merely a Jewish Messiah but the Christ for the whole world, Gentiles included. That is the story and the message that the healed man was sent to proclaim, and that is the message that we, also having been healed by the power of God in Christ are sent to proclaim. Just as the now unpossessed man was commissioned to proclaim the good news of redemption in Christ to the fearful, the reluctant, the wanting-to-disbelieve in his own neighbourhood, and just as Paul and the other saints brought that same message of deliverance from sin and bondage to the whole world, we also are commissioned to proclaim that same Good News. Yes, there are those who will say, "isn't that the person who used to ...?" about us. Yes, there are those who will say in fear, "stay away from me!" Yes, there are those who will argue that being possessed by demons isn't all that bad, that it can with the right treatment be managed. Those are the very people to whom we need to tell the story, the incredible, unbelievable story of being freed, of being released, of being made whole, of being restored, of being made clothed and clean, accepted by Christ, accepted by God. "Return to your home, and declare how much God has done for you", Jesus told the healed man, and tells us. Go, tell the story.