

**3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday Ord Time/Year B Narrative Lectionary**  
**January 26, 2020**  
**Psalm 89:1-4; Mark 5:1-20**  
**Resolutions 4: Learning and Mental Health**  
**“Ah-Ha”**

**Mark 5:1-20**

5They came to the other side of the sea, to the country of the Gerasenes. 2And when he had stepped out of the boat, immediately a man out of the tombs with an unclean spirit met him. 3He lived among the tombs; and no one could restrain him any more, even with a chain; 4for 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.

5Night and day among the tombs and on the mountains he was always howling and bruising himself with stones. 6When he saw Jesus from a distance, he ran and bowed down before him; 7and he shouted at the top of his voice, “What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I adjure you by God, do not torment me.”

8For Jesus had said to him, “Come out of the man, you unclean spirit!” 9Then Jesus asked him, “What is your name?” He replied, “My name is Legion; for we are many.” 10He begged him earnestly not to send them out of the country. 11Now there on the hillside a great herd of swine was feeding; 12and the unclean spirits begged him, “Send us into the swine; let us enter them.” 13So he gave them permission. And the unclean spirits came out and entered the swine; and the herd, numbering about two thousand, rushed down the steep bank into the sea, and were drowned in the sea.

14The swineherds ran off and told it in the city and in the country. Then people came to see what it was that had happened. 15They came to Jesus and saw the demoniac sitting there, clothed and in his right mind, the very man who had had the legion; and they were afraid. 16Those who had seen what had happened to the demoniac and to the swine reported it. 1

7Then they began to beg Jesus to leave their neighborhood. 18As he was getting into the boat, the man who had been possessed by demons begged him that he might be with him. 19But Jesus refused, and said to him, “Go home to your friends, and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and what mercy he has

shown you.” 20And he went away and began to proclaim in the Decapolis how much Jesus had done for him; and everyone was amazed.

Pastor: The Word of the Lord. *People: Thanks be to God.*

Out of the many things we do not know about the life of Jesus, we do not know why he chooses to visit the land of the Geresenes. In his day it is a distant, dangerous place, a context where no good, clean living Jew would find himself. Bible scholar N.T. Wright says, “The Decapolis wasn’t Jewish land, and the people there weren’t Jews. Why, if they had been, would they have been keeping pigs, animals Jews believed to be unclean? Then there are the graveyards and tombs, also considered by Jews as places of contamination. The man who rushes out to meet Jesus is as unclean as you could get” (*Mark for Everyone*, p. 55).

What are we to make of this strange man who Jesus meets, who literally comes out of the dark graveyards of death to see him? To me he sounds pretty scary and beastly, really more animal-like than human being. He lives among the tombs and is restrained with chains. He harms himself with stones and is a bruised, bloodied, dirty character, an outcast, a throw-away, the object of a community’s disgust.

It all sounds so sad, especially because it is a snapshot of ancient mental illness. We do not know what his diagnosis is. The man is very strong, and the people in community with him at some point do not know what to do with him, and so he is locked away alone in the tombs to suffer. In biblical times, he has a demon, possessed by some spirit or spirits of darkness who prevent him from being normal, calm, and whole in any real way. He is possessed, and it sounds like a multiple personality disorder.

As the story unfolds, Jesus shows up, and right away the Gerasene Demoniac wants to know what Jesus is going to do about him. One ah-ha moment of this story for me is that the one who organizes this story makes a distinction between the man and the demon. It is the demon inside the man who recognizes Jesus, and we are left to wonder and speculate: how does the demon recognize Jesus? What does it mean? Jesus has the power to calm the outer storms of life—will he have the power to calm the inner storms too? What will Jesus do about the demon?

This is a good moment for us to pause and name that demon talk is strange for us, is it not? It makes us uncomfortable; it seems more Hollywood and special effects than something real in 2020. We can dismiss the detail about the demon, simply

dismissing it as a throw away detail. We can spend much time wondering where the demon comes from and who it really is. We can be arrogant about it and say this is one more detail in the Bible that makes it outdated and unrelated to our lives today. Or, we can accept Mark's use of demons as the category for the unknown of illness, for some of the dark and heavy things we see friends and loved ones facing all the time, be it depression, alcoholism, or any addiction. To say something is demon is not to dismiss it but to give it a name so that we can deal with it with faith and hope.

I recall the true story about Karl Barth lecturing at a college in the states years ago about Adam and Eve and the serpent, and a graduate student asked this question: "Mr. Barth, do you mean to tell me that you believe in talking snakes?" Barth responded brilliantly, "I am not interested in whether or not snakes can talk. I am interested in what the snake says."

Here in our story, let's not be interested in whether or not demons exist and where they come from, let's be interested and curious about what they say, for unlike the disciples (duhh-sciples, also a code word for "church" in Mark) who do not understand yet who Jesus is, the demons know. They recognize Jesus' power, and I find that detail to be an ah-ha moment in the story. Do you?

Back to the story. So the demon and Jesus interact, and we learn that it has a name: "Legion" meaning not just one but "many," and so these nasty beings ask for Jesus not to send them out of the country but into a heard of swine/pigs. They know they cannot remain in the man, because they know that Jesus is far more powerful than they, and so they wait to see what Jesus will do. Jesus listens. Jesus loves the man who is suffering. Jesus is not afraid to step in and advocate for that one. Jesus gives permission for the demons to enter the pigs, and that is what happens, and they jump off a cliff and drown in the sea. Such a bizarre story. What in the world is God's word for us in this story today?

I will confess to you that I have struggled for many years to make some sense of this story. It is not an easy one. The organizers of the Revised Common Lectionary dodge it completely. N.T. Wright suspects that there is such hatred for Rome and all things Roman, much like demons infecting an otherwise good culture, that the demons in the man in our story are like "a troop of phantom invaders who take over his humanity, giving him super human strength but leaving him a wreck: naked, isolated, and self-destructive" (*Ibid*, p. 56).

Jesus intervenes and casts out the demons. After the demon possessed pigs all die, the possessed man is now relieved of his illness. Jesus heals him, and for the first time, he is clothed and sitting in his right mind. This new reality, what we might think of as Act II of our story, causes great fear and trembling among the people, for the people witness with their own eyes that Jesus has the unusual ability to do what no one else can. He calms outer and inner storms, casts out demons, and brings to wholeness one who is a harm to himself, one who is treated so poorly and harshly because people do not know what else to do with him. Jesus transforms the situation with God's love and mercy. It is a beautiful miracle. Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah.

As the story draws to a close, all the witnesses who are afraid want Jesus out of their community while the now healed man wants Jesus to stay with him. It is a strange yet understandable juxtaposition of feelings, I think. The people who treated the man with the Legion of demons so poorly feel guilt and shame about how they treat one among them, and the one now healed feels.....grateful, whole, new?

What must it feel like to be healed by Jesus? Jesus gives a simple command to the man simply to tell others about the mercy that he knows is real. It is an ah-ha moment that also foreshadows the very way in which Jesus will suffer and die. He, too, will be stripped of his clothing and abused. He, too, will intervene among the powers of darkness and evil so that by his death on the cross and by the power of the resurrection, the world will see the strength, the love, and the mercy of God.

Mental health is the condition of our psychological and emotional well being. In the United States, almost half of adults (46%) will experience a mental illness during their lifetime. 5% of adults (18 or older) experience a mental illness in any one year, equivalent to 43.8 million people. Of adults in the United States with any mental disorder in a one-year period, 14.4% have one disorder, 5.8% have two disorders and 6% have three or more. Half of all mental disorders begin by age 14 and three-quarters by age 24. In the United States, only 41% of the people who had a mental disorder in the past year received professional health care or other services.

(Source: <https://www.mentalhealthfirstaid.org/2019/02/5-surprising-mental-health-statistics/>)

What can we do? What should we do? In 2019, we had 10 people certified in Youth Mental Health First Aid. Pastor Julie got certified in the Adult program,

and we offered many opportunities to learn about mental illness. Just a few weeks ago at First Café, we featured an entire program on the subject. From our clergy to our deacons, from our Stephen Ministry to our partnerships with NAMI, we want to embody the compassion and love of Jesus for all affected by mental illness. It cannot simply be prayed away, and it must not be ignored.

Today's story serves as an invitation to us to be aware of the need for good mental health in our lives, and it is a clarion call to be more sensitive to the struggle of others. One wellness expert encourages us individually to do these 10 things to support better mental health this year: "Get more sleep. Exercise. Find a new hobby that makes you feel good about yourself. Take intentional phone/social media breaks. Meditate. Get a planner. Keep a journal. Help others. Practice gratitude. Be nicer to yourself."

(Source: <https://health.usnews.com/wellness/mind/slideshows/10-new-years-resolutions-for-better-mental-health?slide=12>)

We do not have to do all ten to get the benefit. Slowly making progress on any of these will help our mental and spiritual health.

Not too long ago here at church, Sue Wolford's monthly book club read *Blessed are the Crazy: Breaking the Silence about Mental Illness, Family, and Church*. In it the author, Sarah Lund, asks:

"How can a cross of mental illness be transformed into a symbol of God's power to heal us? I believe that by telling our stories of mental illness, by giving our own testimonies for mental health, we carry our crosses to more healing places, even places of transformation."

No matter what stories we have to tell of mental illness, God's mercy stands in the midst of them to encourage and to love.

Elizabeth Wurtzel died on January 8, 2020. She was unafraid to share the pain of her story of mental illness. In 1994 she wrote *Prozac Nation*, and she bravely battled addiction, depression, and even breast cancer until her death. She writes, "I was the most impossible person ever. Mental illness is so much for complicated than any pill any mortal could invent. Depression is about as close as you get to somewhere between dead and alive."

Our own family have dealt with this through the life and struggle of my dad's youngest brother, my Uncle Wesley, who lived as a paranoid schizophrenic. Were

it not for the love of my nanny and papa, Uncle Wes would have died on the streets. He was often a gentle, loving guy and with the right medication and stable schedule, enjoyed a decent life. But so many people in our culture do not have family and people to help with medication, and so they suffer.

Such is the case of Samantha (a woman in her 30s) who has been in our church in recent years. I encountered her last year when she came to the church office demanding that we find her a home of a church member in which to let her live so that we could support her ministry. She became agitated when I told her this would be impossible, and after much back and forth, I learned that Samantha believed herself to be Jesus. She did not want much help but allowed me to get her a hotel room, and I tried my best to line her up with shelters and mental health resources in Jacksonville, but I fear that she may still be on the streets somewhere.

“Comfort, comfort my people, says your God” (Isaiah 40:1). Part of our vision for 2020 as a church is to do our part to offer mercy to those who suffer and resources for loved ones who are affected too. Just as Jesus crosses many boundaries to help one in need, we are called to follow. Where is God calling you to comfort another? You and I are not victims. We can learn and listen and be a presence of calm during the storm.

Another part of our vision, dare we say a bold Ah-ha moment from our story, is the reintegration of those who are suffering or who have suffered back into the community. May we all remember that Jesus tells the one who he healed to go home and to tell this story. This church is a home for all of us, and Jesus meets us here each week to make His story our story. Here we are welcome. Here we are loved. Here, we have a home.

To God be the glory. Amen.

Special Note—not in the sermon: From “Comfort My People” (a Policy Statement by the PCUSA on Mental Illness, 2008, p. 15)

“In Jesus’ earthly ministry he healed many people: through Jesus’ healing power the blind could see, and the lame could walk, “and they brought to him all the sick, those who were afflicted with various diseases and pains, demoniacs, epileptics, and paralytics, and he cured them” (Matt. 4:24 NRSV). Many of the people Jesus healed were not just physical cures, but they included restoring a person to ritual cleanliness and therefore full participation in community life (lepers). Some also included a healing of the soul through the gift of forgiveness (the paralytic). Still

others included the gift of peace, shalom, and wholeness (the woman with the flow of blood).

In Scripture, it is clear that healing is not confined to physical cure. Therefore, we make a distinction between healing and cure. Cure refers to the elimination of a disease or a disorder. Healing, on the other hand, is something much broader, and may or may not include the elimination of disease or disorder. Healing includes reconciliation, restoration to right relationship, the gift of courage to live faithfully within limitations, internal peace, God's call to vocation, and living a life of prayer, mutually up building interpersonal relationships, committed church life, and self-giving service to the world. People can be healed even when they continue to live with a disease or disorder. Some have discovered that the relentless search for a cure for their disorder is a great burden, and therefore the appropriate hope is for healing, not cure. The challenge for the church is to be an instrument of healing when cure is not likely. As sovereign over all, God is free to use any means to heal the sick. We may experience God's healing power through healing prayer, laying on of hands, anointing with oil, and the prayers of the church. We may experience God's healing power through participation in the love, nurture, and admonition of the church. We may experience God's healing power through medication and psychotherapy. As spiritual, social, and biological beings, God may extend healing power to us through all three of these means, as well as through surprising, wholly unexpected means."