

GOING SANE

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Psalm 42; Luke 8:26-39

***“...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.”***

Luke 8:35b

He was the village madman — the tormented victim of a strange illness that caused him to go out of his head, to scream, to bruise himself with stones. He wandered the hills, naked and raving, a first-century King Lear on the moor.

“What shall we do with him?”, his neighbors asked themselves. “He’s one of our own. But clearly he’s a danger to himself and others.”

There were no mental hospitals in the first century, no psychiatry. The best scientific explanation for this poor man’s affliction, as far as anyone knew, was that he was infested with demons. And what could mere human beings do, to save a man from demons?

Nothing. There was nothing they could do, but chain him up. Which they did: in the most deserted location they could find: the graveyard at the edge of town. He lived, Luke tells us, “in the tombs.”

Can you imagine any scene more desolate? A naked, raving madman in a graveyard, his ankles shackled to a stone, his hair filthy and matted, his body

covered with bruises and sores, his fingers bloody from trying to tear off his chains?

Sometimes he succeeded. Sometimes he managed to pull the metal pin right out of the stone. Then he would wander the road leading to the village, the clanking of the chains warning all comers that the madman had escaped again.

The most loving thing his neighbors could do — which they did, with some regularity — was to catch him and chain him up again: until the next time.

Demon possession is not listed in the DSM manual, today's standard directory of mental disorders. But it's still a reality in some parts of the world.

I was listening recently to a talk given by preacher and author Brian McLaren. He was telling of a trip he and his wife took to Africa. The two of them were walking one day along the seashore.

They'd been hoping for a few moments alone, but they were quickly surrounded by gaggle of small boys: local kids who'd picked out these foreign visitors as easy marks. The boys went about their good-natured begging routine, asking the American couple if they could spare a few coins.

One little boy, Brian noticed, was even more forward than the rest. He kept pawing them and touching them. From the way he carried himself, Brian realized

he had what we'd call in our culture a developmental disability.

One of the older boys noticed the way Brian was looking at the little one. "Oh, don't mind my brother," he said. "He can't help himself. He's got a demon."

That was it: a matter-of-fact diagnosis. No doubt, his brother had always been different. Something wrong in the head. What explanation could there be, but that a demon was in there?

It didn't seem to bother the other boys. They let the demon-possessed boy tag along. They even seemed to look out for him.

That's the way it is with the villagers in the land of the Gerasenes. They bear no ill will toward their local madman. The chains are for his own protection.

On this particular day, he's broken them once again. As Jesus and his disciples make their way into this village, they're confronted by this weird and disturbing figure: naked, bleeding and raving mad, dragging his broken shackles behind him.

Jesus commands the demon to come out of him: whereupon the man shouts back, "What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I beg you, do not torment me!"

James 2:19 says, "Even the demons believe — and shudder." That's what

seems to be going on here. It's ironic to the extreme that it's *an unclean spirit* who calls Jesus "son of the most high God" — long before his disciples understand who he is. Even the demons believe, in their own fashion.

Next, Jesus asks, "What's your name?"

The answer comes back: "Legion" — to which Luke adds the explanation "for many demons had entered him."

Now that word "legion" may not mean much to you, so a little historical explanation is in order. You've heard of "the Roman legions," I expect. In the Roman army, a legion was a unit of just over 5,000 men. It was like Jesus asked the man "What's your name?" and the demon answered back, "My name is Regiment." This is one serious case of demon possession!

(Hold onto that thought about the name "Legion" and its association with the Roman army: I'll have more to say about that in just a moment.)

The demons evidently figure their game is up, so they beg Jesus not to "send them into the abyss" — whatever dark realm they've come from. Instead, he sends them into a herd of pigs, grazing on a nearby hillside. The pigs rush down the hillside and drown themselves in the sea.

(Now, the fact it's a herd of pigs is also significant. Hold onto that thought, too.)

Word travels fast about such marvels. The people of the village come out to see what's happening. They find the man "sitting at the feet of Jesus, clothed and in his right mind." Then comes the real stunner: "And they were afraid."

Why would they be afraid? The man who's been healed is someone they've known all their lives, someone whose illness they've lamented, someone they've tried to help. There he is: no longer raving, wearing clothes, sitting at the feet of Jesus — in the position of a disciple, eager to soak up his teachings.

You'd think they would do the same. You'd think they would want to find out more about this powerful and benevolent healer.

But no. *They are afraid.*

They're afraid of a sane man. He's given them plenty of reason to fear in the past — to fear his uncontrollable behavior, to fear for the safety of their children. But now, this recovered madman is a more fearful figure yet. He has gone sane.

The people should be grateful. They should roll out the red carpet for Jesus. They should ask him to stay with them, to become their resident healer and holy man. Instead, what do they do?

They run him out of town. "Great fear seized them," says Luke. Obliging, Jesus and his disciples get into a boat and sail back across the sea, to their home country of Galilee.

There's an awful lot going on in this story, that makes it far more than a simple matter of a sick man being healed. Let's go back now, and reclaim a couple of those thoughts we've parked for later reference.

The first is the name the demons use for themselves. Their name is "Legion" — that word for a large unit of the Roman army.

The place where all this happens is on the west side of the Sea of Galilee. To the east is the Jewish region of Galilee, Jesus' home country. This region to the west of the Sea is also Jewish territory, but it's got a large population of Greeks and Romans. It's a part of the world where the Jewish faith is on the wane, where the locals have a reputation for having been corrupted by the faith and traditions of their occupiers.

For Luke's original readers, the name "Legion" would have called to mind one thing only: the hated Roman occupiers. To them, the story functions on a whole other level than the way it strikes us. Yes, it's about the compassionate healing of one demon-possessed man, but it's also about the healing of the entire land. Just as the demons have possessed this poor man, so the Romans have possessed the land of God's people.

I also said the presence of a herd of pigs is significant. Now, I know this can be a disturbing detail for those concerned about animal welfare. You just can't tack a disclaimer onto the end of this story, saying "No animals were harmed in the performance of this miracle." All I can say is: this is a story that belongs to a people for whom the raising of animals for food was commonplace and universally accepted. They also sacrificed animals in the Temple as an act of worship.

Luke's first-century readers were far more interested in the *symbolic* meaning of a herd of pigs: in light of Jewish dietary laws that forbade the eating of pork.

Who, in a Jewish land, would be raising a herd of pigs — and for what purpose? Again, Luke's readers would have instantly known the answer to that question. The swineherds are either Gentiles, or they're Jewish people raising unclean animals, as a source of meat to sell to the hated occupiers.

They're collaborators, in other words. When that herd of unclean animals, occupied by thousands of demons — who call themselves by the very name of the Roman army — go charging down the hillside into the sea, it's a clear sign that Jesus intends to bring freedom not only to individual souls, but to the entire nation!

If anyone ever tries to tell you the Bible's not about politics, or that Jesus

cares only about saving people's souls, point them to this passage. Luke wants us to know that Jesus leads people to freedom on every level.

Let's move on, now, to the most troubling detail of all about this story, one we've only mentioned in passing: the fear of the townspeople, upon seeing the man clothed and in his right mind.

Why were they afraid? They should have rejoiced!

I don't think it was just Jesus' power that caused them to fear. Power fascinates. It's attractive, even though it can sometimes be frightening. For the people of a poor village in an occupied land — peasants whose lives are measured by hard work and struggle — a powerful man like Jesus would be quite an asset. And besides, they've just seen Jesus heal a man who was terribly ill, a man they've all given up on. They saw him commanding the demons, and how the demons obeyed. It should have been clear his power is benevolent, not evil.

I think there was another reason the people are afraid: afraid of this man who's suddenly and inexplicably gone sane. They're afraid it might happen to them.

If Jesus can heal this man, the worst hard-luck case they know, what could he do to them? He may just heal them too, of the little faults they've grown all too

fond of — the selfishness, the greed, the petty jealousies and conflicts — all the comfortable patterns of behavior they've lived with for years. The villagers look into the eyes of the madman — eyes once wild but now serene. They see themselves and what they could become. And they are afraid.

It's true, we no longer believe in demons in any literal sense. We speak of mental illness, of neuroses and psychoses. Yet though the language has changed, what still terrifies the world — and all its principalities and powers — is sanity.

Insanity the world can deal with. There are established medical protocols: drugs, psychotherapy. Even if the case is mild and there's no treatment, the world often does make way for those who are "a little eccentric." It accommodates them, as the villagers accommodated their local madman.

Yet, though our society accommodates people who are different, it doesn't often believe they can change.

The preacher Frederick Speakman once told the story of an endearing and somewhat sad character in a small Pennsylvania mining town: the town drunk. Week in and week out, the drunk could be found on the sidewalk, sleeping off the last night's excess. His clothes were shabby, his behavior less than socially acceptable; but he was "one of them," so his neighbors tolerated him.

Once a year, in the summer, things would change. Summer was when the tent-meeting revival came to town. In the front row, every year, sat the town drunk. And every year, on the last night of the revival, he would walk down the aisle and promise the whole community he would change.

The man wasn't being false. For the next few weeks he wouldn't go near a bar. His threadbare clothes would look a little neater. He'd enter into the life of the town, going to church, attending social functions. But every year a strange thing happened: when he was sober, no one would talk to him. He made them uncomfortable. The people found a reformed town drunk much harder to handle than an unreformed one.

They needed a symbol of failure: living evidence that human beings cannot be reformed, that they themselves would not have to face the fearful prospect of new life. And every year, a few weeks after the revival had moved on, the drunk would be back in the bar, and sleeping on the streets again.

He's a tragic figure. Yet even more tragic are the good Christian citizens of that little town: people who so afraid of change that when they see healing and wholeness incarnate before them, they can only fear it.

It's not insanity that threatens the world, but sanity. When, in the course of an otherwise normal life, a person goes sane — that's when the world begins to sit

up and take notice. That's when the world begins to be afraid.

You see that in the stories of all the great reformers of history. One example is Francis of Assisi. A young man, born into a noble Italian family, decides to take Jesus at his word. He gives his possessions to the poor, and vows to live a life of poverty. His family's reaction? Fear and distrust. His father disowns him. Francis obediently gives him back his last possession: the clothes on his back.

There's a famous fresco on the wall of the abbey church in Assisi. It shows Francis, eyes toward heaven, his father on one side, angrily holding his son's clothes; and an archbishop on the other, covering Francis with his cloak. Rather than being protective, the archbishop is looking away, embarrassed. It's as though he were saying, "I know the church says we should give to the poor, but I never thought anyone would listen." Francis went sane, but the world wasn't ready for it.

If you need a more recent example, you only need think of Martin Luther King, Jr. King was a man who was so sane he believed in dreams. "I have a dream," he proclaimed, "that out of the mountains of despair we will hew the stone of hope." You know, of course, what the world did with that dreamer. First it feared him. Then it killed him.

Sanity can be disturbing — even for us as individuals. It’s so easy to become trapped in self-destructive habits, poisonous jealousies, unresolved conflicts. None of us live among the tombs and bruise ourselves with stones, but don't we bruise ourselves inside? Don't we, like the Apostle Paul, fail to do the thing we want, but do the very thing we hate? Which of us have not, at some point in our life, asked the question, “What have you to do with me, Jesus, son of the most high God?”

Jesus came into the world to bring sanity, to bring healing and wholeness — to hew out of those mountains of despair the stone of hope.

In the words of John: **“He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God.”**

Let us pray.

**Lord Jesus,
We are not always sure if we want to be healed.
The madness of sin sometimes looks better to us than the sanity of
righteousness.
Forgive our reluctance and our fear.
Give us courage to step forward
and claim the healing and wholeness you offer. Amen.**

