

Scripture for June 27 2021

Mark 5:1-20 (NIV)

⁵ They went across the lake to the region of the Gerasenes. ² When Jesus got out of the boat, a man with an impure spirit came from the tombs to meet him. ³ This man lived in the tombs, and no one could bind him anymore, not even with a chain. ⁴ For he had often been chained hand and foot, but he tore the chains apart and broke the irons on his feet. No one was strong enough to subdue him. ⁵ Night and day among the tombs and in the hills he would cry out and cut himself with stones.

⁶ When he saw Jesus from a distance, he ran and fell on his knees in front of him. ⁷ He shouted at the top of his voice, "What do you want with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? In God's name don't torture me!" ⁸ For Jesus had said to him, "Come out of this man, you impure spirit!" ⁹ Then Jesus asked him, "What is your name?" "My name is Legion," he replied, "for we are many." ¹⁰ And he begged Jesus again and again not to send them out of the area.

¹¹ A large herd of pigs was feeding on the nearby hillside. ¹² The demons begged Jesus, "Send us among the pigs; allow us to go into them." ¹³ He gave them permission, and the impure spirits came out and went into the pigs. The herd, about two thousand in number, rushed down the steep bank into the lake and were drowned.

¹⁴ Those tending the pigs ran off and reported this in the town and countryside, and the people went out to see what had happened. ¹⁵ 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; and they were afraid. ¹⁶ Those who had seen it told the people what had happened to the demon-possessed man—and told about the pigs as well. ¹⁷ Then the people began to plead with Jesus to leave their region.

¹⁸ As Jesus was getting into the boat, the man who had been demon-possessed begged to go with him. ¹⁹ Jesus did not let him, but said, "Go home to your own people and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and how he has had mercy on you." ²⁰ So the man went away and began to tell in the Decapolis how much Jesus had done for him. And all the people were amazed.

Sermon: Jesus is Lord of All

This dramatic story has all the makings of a good horror film, but one with a happy ending – at least for the man if not the pigs! Some may remember this graphic account from Sunday School and yet, ironically, this story is omitted from the lectionary.¹ What’s deemed OK for children is somehow *not* worthy for adults, probably because it’s assumed we will be embarrassed by the demonic aspect in the account. Yet the passages on either side of this strange story *are* preached upon, namely Jesus calming the storm² and Jesus raising Jairus’ daughter back to life.³ And both of those stories are equally challenging their own ways. I don’t like it when we cut out sections of the gospel that may seem unpalatable to our modern tastes. More importantly, Mark groups all *three* stories together because he’s trying to tell us something. The question is, “What is he trying to reveal to his readers?” Let’s explore the story and see. . .

One of the things Mark stresses is that Jesus was not just a teacher and healer, but that he was also an exorcist.⁴ Very early in Mark’s account of the life of Jesus is an exorcism story.⁵ Indeed, Mark presents *four* exorcism accounts in his gospel,⁶ this one being the longest. It’s important to *not* get sidetracked into looking for medical or naturalistic explanations for demonic behavior, in other words to rationalize the demonic to save our blushes with other contemporary skeptics.⁷ This is a *pre-modern* story and *they* believed in the reality of demons and other dark controlling powers. In some cultures today, the power of the witchdoctor is still perceived to be very real, and a source of genuine fear. The question we should be asking is *not* “What *really* happened?” But what did this happening really *mean*? Put simply, this story is about the conflict between good and evil. That becomes clear when we remember that this account immediately follows the one where Jesus calms the storm on the Sea of Galilee, when the disciples were afraid they would all drown.⁸ They were terrified and, once the storm was still, they ask: “*Who* then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?”⁹ Mark’s readers would have understood that storms were the embodiment of chaos, disorder, and evil and, consequently, Jesus, shockingly, had *the kind of authority* that the Old Testament attributed to *God alone*.¹⁰

¹ Mark 5:1-20, nor its parallels (Matt 8:28–34 and Luke 8:26–39) are included in the Lectionary readings; although the exorcism in Mark 1:21-28 is present!

² Mark 4:35-41.

³ Mark 5:21-43. This also includes the miraculous healing of a woman with an incurable hemorrhaging condition.

⁴ It is usually considered that in the story of the temptation of Jesus, that because Jesus gets the upper hand he has effectively bounded or restrained Satan (in some capacity) and so Jesus became an exorcist. This becomes clear in Mark 3:20-30.

⁵ See Mark 1:23-26. See also: <https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.235/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/The-Authority-of-Jesus-in-Word-and-Deed.pdf> .

⁶ See Mark 1:21–28; 5:1-20; 7:24–30; 9:14–29.

⁷ While some instances may be manifestations of mental illness, or epilepsy, or some other condition, we would be wise not to merely equate *all* such incidents to well-accepted medical causes. On one level, it does *not* matter whether or not *you or I* believe in demons; the point is that the people in New Testament times did!

⁸ Mark 4:35-41. Again, the atmosphere is one of fear, rather than faith (see 4:40-41). (See also 2 Tim 1:7.)

⁹ Mark 4:41 NRSV. Mark has already answered that question in 1:1 – Jesus is the Messiah, God’s Chosen One.

¹⁰ See Job 26:8–13; 38:8–11; 40:41; Ps 33:6–9; 89:8–10; 104:24–26; Prov 8:29.

Now when Jesus and the disciples landed on the east side of the lake, they were now in the *non*-Jewish territory known as the Decapolis, or the “ten cities.”¹¹ The way Mark presents it, this was Jesus’ first attempt to minister to non-Jews, and we – like Mark’s readers - may wonder what the reaction will be.¹² We are then told a man with an “unclean spirit” came from an unclean place - the tombs, the place of the dead - to meet Jesus. Mark describes this nameless person’s tragic and undignified state: He was physically uncontrollable, having the strength to break iron chains that some had used to try and bind him. He had also lost his voice, and would howl and self-harm.¹³ The demons had stripped this man of every shred of humanity; he lived like a wild animal, and was isolated from all social contact.

Mark tells us the man, controlled by the evil spirit *ran* to Jesus and bowed before him. The spirit shouted out: “Leave me alone, Jesus, Son of the Most High God! I implore you by God—do not torment me!”¹⁴ As is typical of exorcism stories, Jesus’ true identity is revealed.¹⁵ The demon is confronting the Spirit of God that is perceived to be powerfully present in Jesus, and by evoking God’s name the demon is trying to get the upper hand.¹⁶ Jesus demands that the demon reveal itself by authoritatively asking: “What is your name?” And the demon within the man replies, “My name is Legion; for we are many,”¹⁷ which also highlights the helplessness of the poor man’s situation. The demon, recognising Jesus’ superior authority, tries to negotiate and plead that Legion not to be sent out the region.¹⁸ “Send us into the swine herd on the hillside,” they begged, and Jesus agreed.¹⁹ This, I suggest, would bring a wry smile on the face of devout Jews! Unclean spirits leave the unclean tombs to enter the unclean pigs, animals that Jews were forbidden to keep. Then, for some unstated reason, the herd of swine stampedes into the sea and drowns. Is that a direct result of Jesus’ action? Or is it a self-destructive act of the demons?²⁰ The story doesn’t say; regardless, Legion returns to the evil watery chaos where they belong! The drowning of the demons and the pigs not only suggests that Jesus has cleansed the area,²¹ but since - by calming the storm - Jesus has just demonstrated he is Lord of the chaotic waters, his authority as an exorcist is further emphasized. A key point of the story, then, is that Jesus has authority even over evil

¹¹ The location was probably Gergesa, because that fits the story’s details. Clearly Mark is retelling a traditional story but does not know his geography! (Some other names, e.g., Gadara, are too distant from the Sea of Galilee.)

¹² Jesus is breaking down barriers that separate Jews from Gentiles, clean from unclean.

¹³ See Mark 5:2-5.

¹⁴ Mark 5:7 NET. (v8 is seen as a rationale after the fact to explain the demon’s statement.)

¹⁵ “Most High God” is the non-Jewish phrase that refers to Israel’s God (e.g., see Dan 3:26); “Son of God” is usually seen as the equivalent of Messiah. See also Mark 1:24; Matt 8:29. See also James 2:19.

¹⁶ In exorcism story’s, evoking the name is seen as having power over the other.

¹⁷ Mark 5:9. Some interpreters suggest that the name “legion” is a veiled reference to the devastation of people and property caused by the Roman occupation. The 10th Legion (over 6000 men), which used the boar as its symbol on its standard, had been stationed there since 6 CE. The imperial powers that control the region perceived themselves as the source of civilization and peace. The local populace, faced with powers it could not resist, had a very different view of their oppressors! Jesus, whose power over chaos was just demonstrated over the sea, shows that the presence of God can rule here too.

¹⁸ Mark 5:10.

¹⁹ Mark 5:12-13. Luke 8:32 and Matt 8:31-32 omit Mark’s mention of 2000 swine; it was likely hyperbole!

²⁰ When it gets its own way, evil is always destructive – ultimately, self-destructive.

²¹ Some scholars say Jesus outwitted the devil. While we wonder about the ethics of this act, be careful: this may be a literary example of Jewish humor! (Moreover, the demons got what they wanted.) Note: the people later want Jesus to leave the area promptly (Mark 5:17); they do *not* start civic proceedings with respect to loss of valuable property.

powers. Moreover, Jesus demonstrates that even *this* pitiable man is *not* beyond God's reach, and that is a reassuring message of hope for each one of us. Moreover, note that Jesus himself *cannot* be polluted or harmed by the man's state of "uncleanness."

What is the reaction to these events? The herdsmen run off and spread the news to the townsfolk as to what just happened, and the people come to see for themselves. They approach Jesus and see that the former demon-possessed man is sitting, clothed, and in his right mind. We are told the people were *afraid*.²² The total transformation of the man's condition is undeniable; the man's dignity and humanity have been fully restored. Their reaction? The man's healing is *not* celebrated; instead, they *beg* Jesus to leave the region.²³ Their *fear* prevents them from appreciating the implications of the newness of life that Jesus has brought about in their presence. Consequently, Jesus' first attempt to bring his message into non-Jewish territory is *not* welcome, and so he leaves by boat to cross the lake.²⁴ Jesus will *not* force himself on people, and respects their free will. While some are drawn by the good news message and powerful acts of Jesus, others are repelled. Jesus does not offer grace alone; he also offers healing and restoration, and some people prefer to stay as they are: "Please go away and leave us alone," that say. Since Jesus does not coerce them with his message, neither should Christians today.

As Jesus was getting into the boat, the man who had been demon-possessed asked if he could go with him; but Jesus surprisingly said no.²⁵ We're not sure why. Perhaps it was because the man was not Jewish and to have him as a disciple would complicate Jesus' mission amongst Jews at that time.²⁶ Instead, Jesus said to him, "Go to your home and to *your* people and tell them of the *Lord's* mercy toward you."²⁷ Two things emerge from this instruction. First, the man is commissioned by Jesus to tell his family and local community of what *God* has done in his life. What is odd here is that on other occasions in Mark's gospel, Jesus usually instructs the healed person *not* to tell anyone!²⁸ It is thought that Jesus grants permission in this case because the man is in non-Jewish territory and his actions would not be a religious or political threat to the ongoing mission of Jesus amongst Jews. Second, what Mark then says is also interesting: "So the man went away and began to proclaim in the *Decapolis* what *Jesus* had done for him, and all were amazed."²⁹ The exorcized man doesn't *just* go to his family with his good news, but tours throughout the ten cities region with his message! And that message is *not*

²² Mark 5:15.

²³ Mark 5:17. God's power was evident in the situation and they feared it.

²⁴ Mark 5:18, 21.

²⁵ Mark 5:18-19a.

²⁶ Some scholars say that Jesus *himself* chose his disciples, *not* the other way around – as in the case of some rabbis.

²⁷ Mark 5:19. The word "Lord" (Greek, *kyrios*) is important here. The implication from the context is Lord means *God*.

²⁸ See Mark 1:40-45; 5:39-43.

²⁹ Mark 5:20. While "All are amazed at this proclamation," nevertheless, astonishment is not the same as faith!

what Israel's God has done for him, but what *Jesus* himself did.³⁰ Some have speculated that this man's mission resulted in crowds coming to Jesus when he later returned to the ten cities region.³¹

What does all this mean for us today? What is Mark trying to tell us? As I said earlier, Mark presents three stories together: Jesus calms the storm revealing not just his authority over nature, but over the powers of evil and chaos that turbulent seas signify. In Revelation, John the Seer's vision of the new heaven and the new earth is one without a sea, in other words, without evil, chaos, and disorder.³² Mark is telling his readers that the calming of the storm is one of many *signs* that Jesus is inaugurating the kingdom or reign of God. This exorcism story is another sign that reveals God's mighty power at work in Jesus in defeating even the darkest powers of evil. Yes, as John the Baptist proclaimed: "The kingdom of God *is* near."³³ Mark's next story is of Jesus healing a woman with an incurable condition followed by Jesus bring back to life Jairus' daughter. Jesus is not just the Lord over evil and destructive powers; he is Lord of *life* itself.³⁴ All this is evidence that God's kingdom is breaking in. God's reign is not fully realized, but it *has* begun. This is further demonstrated in the God's later raising Jesus from the dead.³⁵ Through this sequence of stories, Mark is revealing that Jesus is *Lord of All*.³⁶ Are we willing to acknowledge that Lordship?

What is our reaction to all this? Are we perhaps *incredulous*? This narrative is so far from our daily experience we may be inclined to simply dismiss it. Yet, if we do that, we are likely to dismiss most of the stories of Jesus for exactly the same reason. What we would be left with would be sanitized version of the parables of Jesus and some of his sayings. Any mention of the kingdom of God would also be omitted³⁷ and we would have just a few proverbs that we deem to be wise. People have done that in the past, and they still do, because the Jesus of the Gospels doesn't fit in with our modern categories. Consequently, such people are only willing to accept Jesus on their terms. And that's quite close to the people in the story begging Jesus to leave them alone. As I said earlier, Jesus won't force himself on us. But I suggest it's pointless to say "we are following Jesus" if we have, in fact, figuratively bound him in chains - or in a straightjacket - to not let him be who he is. As C. S. Lewis reminds us: Jesus, the lion of Narnia, is *not tame* – but he is *good*. Too many of us want to domesticate or constrict Jesus.

Alternatively, are we, like the people in the story, *afraid*? What might we be afraid of? Some people fear that acknowledging that Jesus is Master of All will result in a loss of their personal freedom.

³⁰ Is this a Christological hint in Mark that Jesus is the Lord, (*kyrios*)? (Note, it appears that these dramatic stories spread more rapidly than did Jesus's sayings; see Mark 9:38–40.)

³¹ See Mark 7:24–8:10, esp. v31b. (The feeding of the 4000 in Mark 8 is assumed to take place in the Decapolis.) Others wonder if the man disobeyed Jesus!

³² Rev 21:1.

³³ Mark 1:15. See also Matt 3:2, 4:17; Luke 17:21.

³⁴ Moreover, Mark has earlier proclaimed that Jesus, the Son of Man, has authority on earth to forgive sins (Mark 2:10) and is also the Lord of the Sabbath (Mark 2:27–28).

³⁵ See Mark 16:6–7.

³⁶ In a sense, this is part of Mark's response to the disciple's question in Mark 4:41 "Who then is this . . .?"

³⁷ Which also diminishes the meanings of the parables ("The kingdom of God is like . . .").

Ironically, the man in the story *cannot* be chained; one might therefore think that he is the freest person imaginable. In reality, he is enslaved and probably doesn't realize it; *we* know he's not free at all. The gift that Jesus gives is to restore him to his right mind. His true dignity as being made in the image of God is returned to him. Following Jesus may appear less free than his former state, but he discovers his true freedom in his exuberant obedience to Jesus' commission. Elsewhere Jesus says: "You are truly my followers if you remain faithful to my teachings. And you will know the truth, and *the truth will set you free.*"³⁸ The question for all of us today is: "Do we believe that?"

Perhaps we are actually *excited* by this story! Why? Well, for one thing, it reveals that while evil is real, God is stronger.³⁹ And that is a powerful message of hope in every generation. For sure this triplet of stories in Mark raises many challenging questions for us to consider, such as the reality of the Holy Spirit's power over evil in our time. But let's wrestle with those kinds of questions with an open mind.

In the end, I believe that stories like this one force us to take seriously the *whole* gospel message. Like terrified the disciples in the boat, we have to ask ourselves: "*Who* is Jesus?" Mark, like the other Gospel writers, says Jesus is *Lord of All*. What do *we* say? I leave you to ponder that question. Let us pray.

³⁸ John 8:31-32.

³⁹ In Mark 3:20-30, esp. v27, Jesus reveals that he has *restrained* (or bound) the devil! See also: <https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.235/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/Jesus-%E2%80%93-In-Collusion-With-The-Devil.pdf>.