

Reactions to Fear

Prayer: That as the Word is opened to us, we will be opened to the Word.

READ Luke 8:22-39

This is a strange story, but like every other story in the Bible, there are a lot of things for us to learn from it. In particular, we are going to see some different reactions to Jesus that Luke describes as fear.

Scholars are not exactly sure where this event took place, though it is clearly on the eastern, Gentile side of the Sea of Galilee. A couple of things show us that. Jews would certainly not have been farming pigs – they were unclean to the Jews and not to be handled or eaten. And the steep slope leading down to the water is typical of that side of the lake. Jesus and the disciples had sailed across there from Capernaum. On the way, Jesus had calmed a storm so severe that the disciples were sure they were going to drown. So the disciples got off the boat a little rattled anyway, and out to meet them comes this demon-possessed man.

We hear the description of this man, and may have a hard time connecting because we may not believe in the existence of demons. We think we have modern scientific explanations for stuff like this – that demons belong to a distant, primitive time. But Scripture, including this passage, discusses demons in a rather matter-of-fact way, as if their existence was not in question. That should still not be a question. Satan and demons are real and present and at work in the world, and we cannot make them go away by denying their existence. We would prefer to just describe the man here as severely and dangerously mentally ill, but that is not what the Scripture says.

These particular demons recognized something immediately that even the closest disciples of Jesus had not yet recognized – that He was the Son of God. Maybe James the brother of Jesus was there, or had at least heard the story, and remembered this event when he wrote at James 2:19: “You believe there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that – and shudder.” The disciples had just gotten off the boat, still muttering to themselves “Who is this guy who can cause the wind to obey him?” Luke says they asked that question in “fear and amazement”. The demons answered the disciples’

question: this is Jesus, Son of the Most High God. The disciples asked their question in fear because of the demonstration of the power of Jesus that they did not understand; the demons understood the power of Jesus, and knew that they could not withstand Him. The demons feared the power of Jesus, not to do something that would save them as Jesus had with the disciples on the boat, but to destroy them by casting them out of the man and into the abyss.

The people of the community reacted in fear, too. They were so shaken by this demonstration that they asked Jesus to leave.

Here are some things I picked out of a long list of stuff we should learn from this passage.

First... God never gives up on anybody, including those who society has given up on. This demon-possessed man would have been considered unclean on multiple levels by the Jews, and had been ostracized by his Gentile community, too. Naked, dirty, living homeless in the tombs outside town, uncontrollable and dangerous. Jesus addressed him with the kind of simple question that we would ask of any regular person: "What is your name?" There is no condemnation in Jesus for a man that the rest of society had condemned. There is no hesitation in Jesus to show compassion to a man that the rest of society had thrown on the figurative garbage heap. Jesus, friend of sinners is Jesus, friend of all. If we take seriously our call to model every aspect of our lives on Jesus, we will not be giving up on anybody either. We will not deny compassion and love and grace and the simplicity of eye-to-eye conversation to anybody. If we are serious about living the life that we are all called to live after the example of Jesus Christ, we will not be ashamed to speak in His name and offer His compassion.

Second... our fear of change can keep us from experiencing God. The people of the Gerasenes witnessed the power of God to redeem and restore a man from a terrible mental and physical state to one of health and wholeness. The disciples had probably also told them about the storm. This was powerful! This was God among them in a very real and personal way, delivering signs and miracles and demonstrating who He was. But accepting all that was going to require them to change. It was going to require them to

change what they thought about the nature and character of God. It was going to require them to change what they thought about relationship with God. God was not some abstract concept. God was real and personal and present, and to believe that and follow Him was going force them to discard their preconceptions and biases about God and grab onto this new reality. It was more than they were willing to take in, so they asked Him to leave. Their fear expressed itself in the determination to hold on to the life they had – to exclude God from it – because it was theirs and it was known and comfortable and not radical in any possible way. Experiencing this Jesus was radical. Here was a man that demons had recognized as God. Here was a man that challenged them to compassion for the outcast. Here was a man who had no reluctance to turn their world inside out. It was too much. Is Jesus too much for us? Do we really just want to experience God in small, manageable doses? Are we willing to be even just a little bit radical? Are we willing to see the potential of the abundant life that God made us for in people that we have consigned to the garbage heap? Are we willing to see the potential of the abundant life that God made us for when we look in the mirror? Or are we going to anchor ourselves to the lives we have and just ask God to go away and leave us alone? God will not compel or force us to relationship with Him, but if we really let go and open ourselves to the magnitude of His sacrifice for us on the Cross, we will be washed away by the irresistible force of His grace.

Finally... when we get it, when we grasp the reality of the love and mercy and forgiveness and grace of God to us, we will be open and responsive to God's call and direction to us. This man who had been freed from his demons begged to go with Jesus and the disciples, but Jesus had other plans for him. "I know the plans I have for you", God had said through Jeremiah, "plans for a hope and a future." Before he experienced Jesus, this man had no hope and no expectation of a future. I love what Luke does with the words here. Jesus tells the man to go and tell people what God had done for him, and Luke says the man went and told everybody what Jesus had done for him. The words are not accidental. That man heard what the demons said: this was the Son of the Most High God. What keeps us from going all over town telling about how God has saved us from

the power of sin to defeat us in this life and the power of death to keep us from eternal life in the presence of God? What keeps us from going all over town telling about who God is and how He loves us with a passion that we can never match? This former outcast had no such hesitation or reservation. He knew what he had been saved from; he knew who had saved him; and he knew what he had been saved for – to deliver the message of salvation.

This bizarre story of a stampede of demon-possessed pigs has a place in it for each of us. The outcast, and those who had cast him out. The comfortable and the afraid. The bewildered and the complacent. The grace-washed and the assured. The place God wants you to claim for yourself in this story is at the end of that list – washed clean of the burden of sin and death by God’s overwhelming grace and assured of God’s love and salvation. There are two direct words of God for us in this passage. When God looks you in the eye and asks “What is your name?”, He already knows, because you are a child of His. When God says to you, “Go and tell how much God has done for you”, God knows that your lifetime is not long enough to tell it all, because He has done it all.

The Word of God for the people of God.

Thanks be to God.

Amen