



# FIRST (SCOTS) SERMONS

## “FROM THE TOMBS TO TOMORROW”

Scripture Lessons: Exodus 14:1-31; Luke 8:26-39

*This sermon was preached by Dr. L. Holton Siegling, Jr. on Sunday, June 23, 2019  
at First (Scots) Presbyterian Church in Charleston, South Carolina.*

As we turn our attention to this morning’s New Testament Lesson, the Revised Common Lectionary presents us with a story that has often been referred to as “Jesus’ healing of the Gerasene Demoniac,” though, for the sake of our younger listeners, I’m probably going to refer to that “being” as an unclean spirit from time to time. The word Gerasene refers to the people and the area where the events of this story took place. The country of the Gerasene’s was located on the eastern side of the Sea of Galilee – and it is not a mystery as to where this likely was, seeing as there are just a few select places where the landscape presents us with steep edges that lead up to the Sea itself.

We also know this to be a story about God’s work in the life of a particular person – a person who the Bible tells us was possessed by an unclean spirit. Now, generally speaking, when we encounter these kinds of beings it does not consume us. Yet, oftentimes I’ve found that we move past that reality too quickly, perhaps presuming that the setting of this morning’s story was a time in the history of the world when Jesus was not only shaking up the earthly status quo, but also the spiritual status quo – that, in some sense, hell was breaking loose in a way that was unique to that particular moment in time. Or we choose to rationalize the story...and we say things like: “Well, this was more or less a prescientific diagnosis of something that today we might call schizophrenia or something else.” But that doesn’t resolve the fact that unclean spirits are referenced in multiple locations throughout the scriptures, nor should it be lost on us how it is that we can so quickly affirm with all of our heart and soul and mind and strength a supernatural being who is inclined to do us good while all but denying the existence of a supernatural being inclined to do us harm.

You have heard me talk, at times, about the plain meaning of the text; and, in the case of this morning’s story, I don’t think that what we have here is a state of depression so deep that it was “as if” the man in our story was being held captive...he was. Now, for those of us who are without a frame of reference for such an encounter - for those of us who customarily relegate such powers and principalities to the far outer realms of the Christian experience, this is uncomfortable story; because it reminds us that we are not in charge - that we are frail. It reminds us that at any point in time there exists a spiritual realm. Ah, but lest we forget, that too is a realm over which God remains very much sovereign.

And so we turn our attention to Luke chapter 8, beginning with verse 26. “Then they arrived at the country of the Gerasenes, which is opposite Galilee. As he stepped out on land, a man of the city who had demons met him. For a long time he had worn no clothes, and he did not live in a house but in the tombs. When he saw Jesus, he fell down before him and shouted at the top of his voice, ‘What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I beg you, do not torment me’— for Jesus had commanded the unclean spirit to come out of the man. (For

many times it had seized him; he was kept under guard and bound with chains and shackles, but he would break the bonds and be driven by the demon into the wilds.) Jesus then asked him, 'What is your name?' He said, 'Legion'; for many demons had entered him. They begged him not to order them to go back into the abyss.

Now there on the hillside a large herd of swine was feeding; and the demons begged Jesus to let them enter these. So he gave them permission. Then the demons came out of the man and entered the swine, and the herd rushed down the steep bank into the lake and was drowned.

When the swineherds saw what had happened, they ran off and told it in the city and in the country. Then people came out to see what had happened, and when they came to Jesus, 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. Those who had seen it told them how the one who had been possessed by demons had been healed. Then all the people of the surrounding country of the Gerasenes asked Jesus to leave them; for they were seized with great fear. So he got into the boat and returned. The man from whom the demons had gone begged that he might be with him; but Jesus sent him away, saying, 'Return to your home, and declare how much God has done for you.' So he went away, proclaiming throughout the city how much Jesus had done for him."

Leader: The Word of the Lord.

**People: Thanks be to God.**

Let us pray...

Almighty and Everlasting God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be pleasing, acceptable, and even joyful in your sight, for you are our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Allow me to set the stage for this story just a little bit more...Jesus has just come in from an outing with his disciples on the Sea of Galilee. During their trip, a terrible storm had broken out. So terrible, in fact, that the disciples were afraid for their lives. Jesus, however, remained the perfect picture of peace – literally sleeping through the storm. When they woke Jesus up they shouted, "Master, master, we are perishing!" And that's when Jesus did something extraordinary. He stood up and he rebuked the wind and the waves...and there was calm. And upon seeing this the disciples say, "Who then is this, that he commands even the winds and the water, and they obey him."

Now, any conversations that happened after that are left up to our imagination, but what we do know is that the minute the boat comes to shore, they are met by the man in this morning's story. While this man would sometimes find himself in town, but, apparently he would cause such a commotion, that he would be put in chains – maybe for his own sake or maybe for the good of the townspeople – but the Bible goes on to say that he would break those chains and would be led off into the wilds. But not just any wilds – not just any wilderness. In those days, cemeteries would have tombs in them that were more or less open prior to being occupied...and so it happened that the tombs functioned as this man's home, which as we

know, was really no home at all...nor did he have any clothes to speak of...why, he didn't even have a voice when we stop and think about it.

When Jesus commands the unclean spirits to come out of him, it is not the man who speaks, but that which torments him. And notice what it doesn't say – the unclean spirit doesn't say, as the disciples had said earlier while on the boat, "Who then is this?" No! The spokesman for the unclean spirits knows exactly who Jesus is. "What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I beg you, do not torment me."

I say "spokesman," because, while, at this point, only one being is talking..."do not torment 'me,'" it says - when Jesus asks for the name of this man's oppressor, the name that is given is Legion. And that name means something to the people who were there as well as those who first heard this story. You see, the name "Legion" refers to a unit of roughly six thousand men in the Roman Army. The name basically implies that this man was oppressed beyond all measure. In a manner of speaking, he was in a war that he himself has no choice of winning!

This was not the first time a person or God's people would be engaged in a battle that seemed hopeless. Consider again the Israelites as they made their way to the water's edge and with Pharaoh's army closing in behind them. With the water on one side and Pharaoh's army on the other, all hope seemed lost – there seemed to be no way at all! But then, in God's gracious mercy, the waters of the Red Sea parted, and the Israelites walked across on dry ground. As we know from our Old Testament Lesson this morning, Pharaoh's army pursued them; but they ended up being drowned when God allowed the waters to return to their place. And so it was that God's people were finally and fully set free from the bondage of Pharaoh!

We know from our New Testament Lesson that the man from the country of the Gerasene's was not free...he too was also up against a barricade that prevented him from experiencing the fullness of life that God intended...but God in Christ was intent on changing that! And the unclean spirits – they know this...and so they ask not be sent into the "abyss," but rather into a herd of pigs -- and Jesus grants their request!

I used to feel bad for the pigs in our story. I mean, there they were, already shunned by the religious Jews in the surrounding area...grazing – mucking around in the mud – doing whatever it was the pigs do...essentially minding their own business, only to be completely overtaken. Now, lest we forget, God loves animals – God created them along with the world and called it good! His eye is on the sparrow, as we sang this morning...ah, but make no mistake about it, God's crowning achievement in creation was humankind, and God has shown through the years that he will gladly place a ram in the thicket to spare Isaac's life, or kill the fatted calf upon the return of his prodigal son, or sacrifice a herd of pigs for the sake of just one of his children. Why in time, God will even sacrifice his own Son for the sake of his people. And so, it happens that straightway, the unclean spirits go into the swine, and then off a cliff they go – their power and their control essentially disappearing into the water, much like Pharaoh's army of old.

It's a fascinating story, really...and I think it has a great deal to teach us today. I continually come back to the truth in the unclean spirit's statement – how he referred to Jesus as the "Son of the Most High God," because that tells me that Jesus demands not only our allegiance, but

also the allegiance of everything under heaven – the wind and the waves, armies of people or of spirits...none of them, not one, has any power or any authority over Jesus Christ, our Lord.

And in that conviction, dear friends, there is great hope. It may not be unclean spirits that hold us captive – it may be some other expression of the bondage of sin. I suppose it could be anything that holds sway over our lives: a memory of a loved one, an impending surgery, an addiction, some mistake which perhaps always seems visible in our rear view mirror - like an army in hot pursuit! Yet those things that would seek to entomb us – as much as they have to say about who we are today or what we have experienced in our past – they will never have the last word about our tomorrow, because that word belongs to God.

And I'm not going to stand up here and tell you that the waters will always part, because sometimes they don't...sometimes there are things that get in the way of us experiencing a life lived to the glory of God, and so we have to wait. Sometimes it is all we can do to just get through another day; oh, but God says that those days – in fact, the full expanse of our lives - that they belong to him, and at the end of the day, now or at some time in the future...God will manage to bring forth order out of chaos – and when that time comes, we will experience healing and we will experience wholeness; some of us have – all of us will!

As we might imagine, news of a healing like this travels fast. And as the people arrived to see what had happened, what they witnessed was a man sitting at the feet of Jesus who was now in his right mind – a person whose soul was well. Yet, interestingly enough, the emotion that filled the hearts of those who witnessed this change in this man's life was the same emotion that overcame the disciple's on the Sea of Galilee – they were afraid. They knew what this man's life was like before, and they know what his life is like now...and the dramatic change scares them, so much so, that the Bible tells us that they "ask Jesus to leave" ...just go away. But, unlike them, the man who was healed, he begs to stay with Jesus, but Jesus would not let him. "Return to your home," Jesus says, "and declare how much God has done for you."

It makes me wonder what it means that the so-called "Gerasene Demoniac" is the first person in Luke's Gospel to receive a commission to proclaim to the world what God had done for him through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Well, I, for one, think that it means, at least in part, that in Christ, the past is finished and gone, and that the future is fresh and new. This man's past consisted of terrible defeat...it consisted of a life that was entombed in every sense of the word, but none of that matters. What I mean is that what happened yesterday does not define his tomorrow. And that which defines his tomorrow is the same thing that defines ours! For those of you who are leaving this afternoon as part of our Asheville mission team, should people ask you why you are there -- what will you tell them?

Will you tell them that you like to help other people; that you want to spend time with your friends in service? Will you tell them that you are there because you want to make a difference in someone else's life? Oh, I suspect you may be going for all of those good reasons and more; but you really go – and this is vitally important – you really go for the same reason that the church goes anywhere...it is because the love of Christ compels us. That's the only reason we can go and have a lasting impact rather than being some noisy gong or clanging symbol – it is because we go with the love of Jesus in our hearts.

There's no doubt that telling others what Jesus has done in our life comes in many forms...be we headed off to Asheville today, or to Honduras in the coming weeks or delivering Meals on Wheels tomorrow. The important thing is that, as we go, we bear witness to God's love – and praise be to God that love is stronger than anything in the whole world that would seek to do us harm. That is the difference that Jesus makes in our lives, and that is the difference that we, by God's grace, can make in the lives of other people.

Let us pray...

Gracious and Loving God, when all hope seems lost, when it seems that nothing in the world can offer us hope, remind us that such days of being held captive and lost are forever numbered. Remind us that you have the power to bring about joy in the morning. Make it so, dear Lord, make it so. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit we pray. Amen.

*\*The following sermon has not been edited by the author; therefore, there may be discrepancies. When in doubt please refer to the audio version of the sermon on this website.*