

23.06.2019
By Brec Seaton

Introduction

For some, this passage will resonate with the casting out of demons in spiritual warfare. For others, this is a passage discussing an issue that has long—since disappeared from society. Wherever we sit with the spiritual possession of a person with evil spirits, this passage demonstrates a way of moving towards a difficult and potentially dangerous situation, of the use of power in the face of fear, of choices made and impact felt, and the lasting effect of a person transformed by the healing power of Jesus.

Text

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.

Comment

Anticipation is in the air. The door opens and the first group of people move in to take their seats. Some visibly nervous, others with tension in their face. Some with anger, others with unprecedented uncertainty. The door opens again, and still others take their seats at the wide circular table. Nervous glances take place across the room. The tension is palpable, fear even. Unsure what will be said across this inviting table.

The group are invited into the space held by the facilitator. Invited to share their fears, their uncertainties, and their gripes with one another. And in this space, where the unknown is present, a transformation takes place. Those who haven't spoken sometimes for years speak to another. Those who are full of sorrow and pain, begin a journey of understanding. The fear and pain binding the parties together, inviting them to slowly uncover their differences, to both speak and to listen with a new level of understanding. And over the course of the conversations, fear and tension is replaced, at first with moments of 'Ah ha... I didn't realise that was why you did that - I'm sorry you felt you needed to act in this way', to laughter and a coming together of the two groups where tension and fear is replaced with the beginnings of trust and understanding.

As Jesus steps out of the boat onto land, a demon-possessed man comes into his space, into his room. The pain and fear was visible. The pain and fear of the demon-possessed man. The terror of the demons. And there is another group who appear later - the townspeople, with fright and tension in their eyes. And Jesus holds the space that is full of fear for conversations to take place. A conversation with the demons, a conversation with the demon-possessed man, and he listens to the fears of the townspeople, respecting their request to do no more - to leave the shore-line.

This is a story about the relationship between fear and power. Much of this chapter in Luke's gospel considers this dynamic - the disciples in the boat when the storm rose, the lady who was too afraid to speak to Jesus to ask for healing and touched his cloak instead, and Jairus who was afraid his daughter was about to die. The story of the man possessed by demons is largely about spiritual powers. The demons living in the man gave him a strength that was terrifying. The townsfolk were afraid of him - locking him in chains which he broke free from. The demons had power over the man - and they used their power to torture the man and create a culture of fear in the town. The man was banished to living like an animal in the tombs, naked. Later on, Jesus too will be naked in front of a crowd - as he too is tortured during his own death.

Jesus is not afraid of the strength of the man or of the demons. Instead, as in any conflict that is going to be resolved, Jesus walks towards the situation, and invites others into the space. He is present in the situation, he demonstrates authority and stature. He engages in a conversation with the demons, for it is the demons who are speaking and not the person. When Jesus was tempted by the devil in the wilderness as he began his ministry the devil approached Jesus with a challenge - to show his power. But Jesus did not turn stones into bread, or jump of the cliff so that he could be saved.

And now, Jesus once again listens to the demons speaking. The demons are afraid - they know the power of Jesus. Jesus' power is not from his position in society, or from his heritage - he is the son of a carpenter after all - but power from God. A spiritual power. He uses this power wisely and effectively. And once again Jesus has not responded in the way that the demons would have liked - he commands them to leave the man. Jesus does, however, listen to their request not to order them into a chasm -and Jesus obliges by sending them instead into pigs. This was a step down for the demons. For a start, pigs don't speak, and for the Jewish community they are considered unclean.

The impact of the use of Jesus' power to heal was fear for some. The fear of the demons is palpable, and they were not alone in this fear. When the townspeople heard about the incident from those tending the pigs (who watched the whole episode) – they too were in fear. Afraid not now of nature and what the possessed man had been capable of, but of the power that Jesus holds.

The power and the presence of Jesus was not a power or presence they could reckon with, nor control, nor understand – and they ask Jesus to leave. They choose not to move towards Jesus to listen and gain an understanding of his actions. They had the opportunity to invite Jesus into their town, to see a new way of living. But, unsure of the future, they let their fear dictate their journey – and in doing so missed out on a new way of living.

Imagine the disappointment the healed man must have felt when Jesus told him to return home and tell of all that God had done. He was not afraid of Jesus or his power. He was restored to health – and now he had to face these fearful people from his town. The man gained strength and grace and returned home. He found a new power – the power that comes from a relationship with God. A grace, a love, a new way of being. All fear was gone.

Response

We might be tempted to take our Gospel reading with a light touch, marvelling at yet another healing by Jesus – and wonder what became of those who were responsible for the herd of pigs. Yet this passage has a depth – richness, unpredictability, challenge. The relationship between fear and power is tangible. The demons in our own lives are the fears that suppress us, the powers that prevent us being who we truly are in Christ.

Take a piece of string or an old shoe lace, and allow yourself a few moments to consider what fears have a hold in your life. When you identify a fear, tie a knot in the string. Notice that as more knots are tied, the string becomes shorter – just as our lives become restricted when we live with fear.

Some fear is about a situation – a relationship, an illness, our work. Some fear is thinking about the future, or our fear for others. Fear can be deep rooted. Fear is real. Fear is sometimes necessary to keep us alert to dangers around us.

Consider if you are able and ready to let go of the fear that holds you back. Over the coming week, as you let go of a fear, untie the string and watch as the string once again becomes longer – a symbol of your life being restored from the fear that once held you back.

Prayer

O God,
when we live with fear,
and when this fear embodies our lives
and takes over our whole being,
we seek your power to overcome the demons
that have trapped us in this emotionally draining and damaging life.
We seek to live with your power, your love, your conviction,

that whatever we face in life, we do so in your presence.
With your love, your compassion and your tenderness.

Amen

Fear is to be locked inside a room with no windows and no door.

Fear is to be trapped in the middle of a gorse bush, with every movement pushing the thorns deeper into the skin.

Fear is a smell as contagious as a virus spreading its illness.

God – when we are locked inside ourselves by fear, show us the door that we might choose to travel through to freedom.

God – when we are trapped by fear, let us journey through the pain into your healing arms.

God, when all we can do is smell fear, let us be transformed to see, hear and smell the rich promise you give for our restoration to full health. Amen

Season: Ordinary time

Themes: