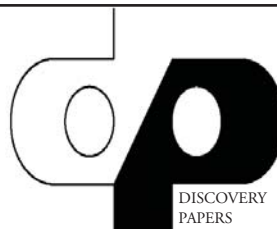


UP FROM THE TOMBS

SERIES: THE WAY OF THE LORD: FOLLOWING JESUS IN THE GOSPEL OF MARK



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Mark 5:1-20
15th Message
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Many of us who follow Jesus feel that we're not doing enough to share the gospel. On the one hand, we don't know how to "evangelize." On the other hand, we're afraid to evangelize. Even our meager efforts to "witness for Christ" seemingly fall on deaf ears. We fight off feelings of guilt because of our fears and ineffectiveness by concluding, "I'm not a gifted evangelist."

Maybe we're making things too complicated. Jesus told his first disciples, "Follow Me, and I will make you become fishers of men." He commissioned all his disciples to preach the gospel (Mark 1:17, 3:14). Jesus takes it upon himself to make us what he wants us to be. In Mark 5:1-20, he meets a tortured individual and makes an evangelist of him—all in a day. What will Jesus make of us? Will we follow him? Will he make us become fishers of men?

After an eventful journey across the Sea of Galilee, Jesus, his twelve disciples, and other followers arrive on the east shore: Gentile country. Jesus is taking on the vocation of Israel to be a light to the nations. His dangerous mission—taking a message of the kingdom of the God of Israel to hostile Gentile territory—almost ended in the stormy sea. It faces another threat when he comes ashore.

Mark 5:1-20:

¹They went across the lake to the region of the Gerasenes. ²When Jesus got out of the boat, a man with an evil spirit came from the tombs to meet him. ³This man lived in the tombs, and no one could bind him any more, not even with a chain. ⁴For 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. ⁵Night and day among the tombs and in the hills he would cry out and cut himself with stones.

⁶When he saw Jesus from a distance, he ran and fell on his knees in front of him. ⁷He shouted at the top of his voice, "What do you want with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? Swear to God that you won't torture me!" ⁸For Jesus had said to him, "Come out of this man, you evil spirit!"

⁹Then Jesus asked him, "What is your name?"

"My name is Legion," he replied, "for we are many." ¹⁰And he begged Jesus again and again not to send them out of the area.

¹¹A large herd of pigs was feeding on the nearby hillside. ¹²The demons begged Jesus, "Send us among the pigs; allow us to go into them." ¹³He gave them permission, and the evil 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.

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

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

Two kingdoms collide

A fearsome man who possesses supernatural strength, because of an unclean spirit, rushes toward Jesus. All attempts to restrain him have failed. The city has no place for him, so he lives in tombs, subterranean caves that were sometimes appropriated by the poor. Mark depicts the man in a way that is reminiscent of the storm. Both

the storm and the man, by all appearances, cannot be controlled. Jesus rebuked the fierce (literally “great”) wind. What will come of his confrontation with this man, who shouts with a loud (literally “great”) voice? Jesus said the kingdom of God is like a man who casts seed on the soil and goes to bed at “night” and gets up by “day,” but this “man,” a subject of the kingdom of Satan, screams and gashes himself “night and day” (Mark 3:27).

No one was able to “bind” him, nor was anyone “strong” enough to subdue him. Jesus, however, in response to some scribes’ accusation that he was in league with the devil, said that no one can enter the “strong” man’s house and plunder his property unless he first “binds” him. Jesus, proclaimed by John the Baptist to be literally “stronger” than he, has come to plunder Satan’s “house” and liberate those who have been taken captive (Mark 1:7, 3:22-30). Two kingdoms collide on the shore.

Instead of attacking Jesus, however, the man bows down before him. The man with supernatural strength knows he is in the presence of a greater power. Unlike most of Israel, which sees but can’t perceive, the unclean spirit, even “from a distance,” perceives that the kingdom of God is present in Jesus (Mark 4:12). Jesus commands the unclean spirit to come out of the man, but nevertheless listens to its appeal. The spirit, speaking through the man, employs the same confrontational words that another demon used when speaking to Jesus (Mark 1:24).

Literally, the man says, “What to me and to you,” a Hebrew idiom of conflict (Judges 11:12; 2 Samuel 16:10, 19:22; 1 Kings 17:18). This time, however, the demon identifies Jesus not as “the Holy One of God,” but as “Son of the Most High God,” a greater title that acknowledges Jesus’ superiority. Whereas the demon in Mark 1 vainly attempted to intimidate Jesus, this demon, perhaps in light of the earlier failure, assumes a more defensive posture. The demon pleads for mercy by appealing to the supposed disposition of the Most High God, whom Jesus knows to be a God of mercy. Surely, the demon wants Jesus to believe, the Most High God takes no pleasure in the torture of any being, even an evil spirit. So the demon tells Jesus, “I implore you by God, do not torment me!” The demon is seeking to avoid the torment of judgment that involves restriction and finality (Matthew 8:28; Luke 8:31; Revelation 18:10, 15; 20:1-3).

The unclean spirit confesses that its name is Legion and that, in actuality, it comprises many spirits. A legion, in military terms, constituted up to 6,000 troops. Even a legion of unclean spirits has to submit to Jesus. It is reduced to begging Jesus to send it not out of the region, but into

a heard of nearby swine.

Mark does not explain the reason for the request beyond the unclean spirits’ impulse to avoid torment. By all appearances, though, the spirits have been influential in Gentile land east of the sea. They know the territory, so to speak, and may want to stay for that reason. Jesus grants the request, and the 2,000 swine, under the influence of the spirits, run into the sea and are drowned. Unable to destroy the man they occupied, the spirits instead destroy the swine. The demise of the swine demonstrates the destructive intent of the unclean spirits and constitutes an observable victory over them. Furthermore, the drowning of the swine serves as a sign to the man that his tormentors are gone. Jesus calms the storm that twisted the personality of the man, just as he calmed the storm that whipped up the sea. [The story does not reflect the kind of concern for animal life that has become common in the West. The scriptures portray human life as more valuable than animal life. In Matthew 12:22, Jesus says, “How much more valuable then is a man than a sheep!” Furthermore, pagans sacrificed pigs as part of religious rituals. The demise of the herd cleanses the land of idolatry.]

The story of the demoniac, in tandem with the story of the calming of the sea, echoes the exodus. Like Israel of old, Jesus and his followers, representing the new Israel, come through the sea—not the Red Sea but the Sea of Galilee—despite ominous opposition. Neither the old Israel nor the new Israel, however, drowns in the sea. Instead, Egypt meets its demise, in the case of the exodus, and the demons meet their demise, in the case of the new exodus.

Israel’s separation from Egypt represented a military victory. Likewise, military terminology appears throughout this story. The word “legion,” as noted, was used in connection with an army. The word “herd” was used of a group of military recruits (verse 11). The word “send,” in connection with the spirits’ request of Jesus, was used of dispatching troops (verse 12). The word “rushed” was used of a military charge (verse 13).

By and large, Israel was hoping for a new exodus that amounted to victory over Rome (Isaiah 63:11-12). Jews resented the presence of the Roman legions that occupied their land and wanted their God to push them back to the Mediterranean Sea. If the Romans drowned in the sea, like the Egyptians of old, so much the better. After all, in Daniel’s vision, the beasts, representing pagan powers, came from the sea. So much the better if the pagans, along with their gods, drown there (Daniel 7). In Mark’s story, however, demonic legions—not Roman legions—pose the

real threat. The new exodus defeats Satan, not Gentiles. In fact, it rescues not simply Israel, as in the old exodus, but also Gentiles.

Ordinary Jews would have nothing to do with the Gerasene man. He's a Gentile and he entertains unclean spirits. Moreover, he lives among the dead, further sullyng his unclean condition (Numbers 19:11-19). Jesus, though, isn't an ordinary Jew. Unlike most of his contemporaries, who cling to nationalism, Jesus embraces the vocation of Israel to bless the nations. The man who called himself Legion is the first Gentile to be liberated in the new exodus. Furthermore, he becomes a preacher, like Jesus. Later in the gospel, Jesus will be portrayed in a way that echoes the experience of the demoniac. The story of the demoniac and the story of the death of Jesus both include binding, nakedness, isolation, flagellation, and a tomb or tombs (Mark 5:15; 14:50, 65; 15:2, 19, 20, 46). The demoniac becomes like Jesus, and Jesus becomes like the demoniac.

A world in pain

If the story of Jesus is bound together with the story of the man from the tombs, then the story of the church is likewise bound together with the pain of the world.

Jesus takes on Israel's vocation to be the light of the world and then shares it with us. If we, as his church and as his followers, take on this vocation and venture into new territory, we may feel as if something with supernatural strength is rushing toward us. Everything within us may want to run the other way, to go back to where we came from, to return to the place where we can believe the gospel while at the same time risking nothing for it.

Our world, though, suffers at the mercy of evil forces. Many people live in isolation, like a man from the tombs. No one is able to restrain the relentless storm in their lives. They scream in torment, sometimes for the world to hear, sometimes to no one. Their only relief comes from self-flagellation. In some cases, they gash themselves, quite literally. In other cases, they assault their psyches with self-condemning thoughts.

If you talk to them about Jesus, they might say something like, "What business do we have with each other?" They don't trust anything that looks like love, because they've been burned before. They're suspicious of God talk. They're afraid that if they allowed themselves to believe in Jesus, they'd only be setting themselves up for another letdown. If they were vulnerable enough to voice their feelings, they might say something like, "I implore

you by God, do not torment me!"

The man from the tombs gives us a picture of our world, which is in the clutches of the evil one, who enslaves people to the dark spiritual, political, and economic powers of this world. Who are we to think that we can take on such a foe? Who are we to think we have something to say to the pain of the world? Who are we to think we can do battle with the legions of the world? Who are we to think we can change the world's mind about Jesus of Nazareth?

The answers to these questions concern what we believe. The unclean spirits that controlled the man from the tombs knew, as they bowed on the shore before Jesus, that they were in the presence of a greater power. They knew who they were dealing with: the Son of the Most High God. The evil forces in this world, the legions of demons that wage war against humanity, and even Satan, "the strong man" himself, are no match for the Son of the Most High God. Jesus has bound the strong man and sends us out, by the power of the Holy Spirit, to plunder his house and rescue the captives. It's one thing to give intellectual ascent to the lordship of Jesus Christ. It's another thing to believe it in such a way that you raid enemy territory. If we do so, if we trust in Jesus and confront the power of evil with the power of love, even the legions will be reduced to begging for mercy.

For those of us who have been lulled to believe that the gospel is concerned mostly with getting you into heaven and helping you get your life together until then, this passage serves as a wakeup call. Make no mistake: we're in a war. Some treat the church as if it were a cruise ship that caters to its needs. The church isn't a cruise ship; it's a battle ship.

Let us make sure, however, that we're fighting the right enemy and employing the right weapons. Our objective is not to push the Democrats or the Republicans or the terrorists back to the sea. Our objective is not to advance western-style Democracy or the cause of the identity group to which we belong, be it national, ethnic, or generational. The apostle Paul tells us, "For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places" (Ephesians 6:12). He also tells us that "the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh, but divinely powerful for the destruction of fortresses" (2 Corinthians 10:4).

Our objective is to enter the places in the world where evil forces hold sway (and where don't they hold sway?) and bring to those places the influence of the gospel so that

the power of love might prevail over the power of evil. We speak truth, we act in love, we pray ceaselessly—and God will win the war. In fact, the war has already been won in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Our task, by the power of the Holy Spirit, is to implement the victory. Along the way, we'll watch a few demons go down and a few tortured souls rise from the tombs.

The iconic words of Hudson Taylor, the 19th century missionary to China, are worth invoking at this point: *God's work done in God's way will never lack God's supplies.* Be strong and courageous, do not tremble or be dismayed, and do not fear where you tread, for the power of the Son of the Most High God, present with you in the person of the Holy Spirit, is with you.

Jesus commissions a preacher

Word of the demoniac's liberation and the herd's demise spreads, and people come from far and wide to see for themselves. When they observe the condition of the former demoniac, they become frightened, just as the disciples became frightened after Jesus calmed the storm. The disciples, to their credit, responded to their fear with a question about Jesus' identity (Mark 4:41). After hearing about the death of the swine, however, the locals are only interested in persuading Jesus to leave their land. They see him as nothing more than a wonderworker who might have the power to wreak havoc with their economic and religious systems, dependent as they were on swine for both food and ritual sacrifices. The unclean spirits "implored" Jesus to allow them to stay in the region, while the residents of the region "implore" Jesus to leave it. The narrative portrays the residents as preferring, albeit unwittingly, unclean spirits to the Son of the Most High God. The locals fail to understand the meaning of Jesus' actions, just as those outside the kingdom of God fail to understand the meaning of the parables (Mark 4:11-12).

Jesus, just as he complied with the request of the spirits, complies with the request of the locals. He leaves their region. While he is getting in the boat, however, the former demoniac begins "implored" Jesus to allow him to literally "be with him." When Jesus commissioned his twelve disciples, he appointed them to "be with him" (Mark 3:14). Jesus, however, denies the man's request and gives him a different assignment. Whereas Jesus granted the requests of opposing demons and resistant humans, he denies the request of a follower. The unclean spirits want to stay, and Jesus complies. The residents want Jesus to leave, and he complies. His follower wants to leave with him, and Jesus objects. What gives?

Jesus departs, but he leaves behind a preacher. Whereas the residents who witnessed the liberation of the demoniac and the demise of the swine "reported" the news to other residents, Jesus tells the man to "report" to residents the great things the Lord has done for him. The man complies, generating a response of amazement.

Jesus' dangerous mission to the other side of the sea turns out to be for the sake of only one person. But that person evangelizes the region. When Jesus returned to the region, the residents received him enthusiastically (Mark 6:53-56). Apparently, the man preached effectively. The parables of Mark 4 are played out in the life of this man in Mark 5. He's like the good soil in the parable of the sower and the parable of the seed, bearing fruit thirty, sixty, and a hundredfold, canceling out the hard-heartedness of his fellow residents. Instead of putting the lamp under a basket or a bed, he puts it on the lamp stand. He listens carefully to Jesus, in line with the parable of the measure. He's the first "bird of the air"—the first Gentile—to nest under the shade of Jesus' mustard plant.

On the west side of the sea, Jesus told a man whom he had cured of leprosy to keep quiet about his healing (Mark 2:43-44). Why does Jesus tell one man to be quiet and another man to spread the news? The difference concerns location. Publicity constitutes more of a risk in Jewish land. Jesus' popularity in the west fomented wrong-headed Messianic expectations, restricted his movement, and attracted the attention of Jewish enemies. He is not so concerned about restriction of movement in Gentile land, for he makes only brief appearances there and he doesn't expect to contend with either Messianic expectations or Jewish enemies who could arrange for his arrest.

Evangelism redefined

Sadly, many today, like the Gerasenes, hear of Jesus and see evidence of his power in the lives of his followers but don't invite him into their lives. Why? Mark's narrative suggests that some people perceive Jesus as a threat to their way of life. If they welcome Jesus into their lives, they worry that he—representing an outside force—will interfere with their ideas about money and spirituality. The power they fear is the power of Jesus to wreak havoc with their hopes—oftentimes, their hope for prosperity. For this reason the question of Jesus' identity never rises to the surface. They send him packing without seriously considering who he is. In our culture, the economy is one of our lords, and those who fuel it and fix it are our priests. The mantra for the modern political campaign is "It's the economy, stupid!" There's not much room for Jesus in such a world, unless

of course you get him to service your system, as so many try to do. Unwittingly, our world prefers unclean spirits, who are only too happy to go unnoticed while they enslave us to the whims of the economy.

The amazing thing is that the Son of the Most High God departs if people ask him to. He has the power to cast out a legion of demons. He has the power to heal the sick and even raise the dead, as evidenced by Mark 5:41-42. With all that power, he doesn't force himself on anyone, and he doesn't stay around if he's not wanted. When it concerns whether he stays or whether he goes, we have the power. You have the power to welcome him, serve his purposes, and gladden his heart. You also have the power to send him packing, destroy yourself, and break his heart. The Pharisees grieved Jesus because of their hardness of heart (Mark 3:5).

Note, though, that if you welcome Jesus, he will confound your expectations. Jesus granted the requests of all his opponents in the story, but not the request of the one who wanted to follow him. Have you ever felt that all those around you are getting what they want except for you? When you feel that way, watch for the Lord to open a door that you never considered. If we trust him, we will bear fruit thirty, sixty, and a hundredfold.

Jesus confounded Paul's expectations. Paul thought he could have a bang-up ministry sharing the gospel with Jews in Jerusalem. He told Jesus, "Lord, they themselves understand that in one synagogue after another I used to imprison and beat those who believed in You. And when the blood of Your witness Stephen was being shed, I also was standing by approving, and watching out for the clothes of those who were slaying him." But Jesus said to him, "Go! For I will send you far away to the Gentiles" (Acts 22:17-21).

Note, also, that all you need to do to "evangelize" and "preach" is tell people "what great things the Lord has done for you." You don't need to be trained. All you need to know is what the Lord has done for you. All you need to do is tell it. With no training whatsoever, the man from the tombs began telling people what the Lord had done for him.

One of the ways you can begin to do this is simply by incorporating into your everyday interactions language that includes the Lord. First, work such language into your interactions with other followers of Jesus. I notice sometimes that we're reluctant to talk about Jesus even with fellow believers. Start telling people, on a regular basis and in everyday conversations, what the Lord is showing

you and what he's doing for you. Once you start doing that, don't edit yourself when interacting with seekers and skeptics. You might raise some eyebrows, but, going back to Mark 4:40, "Why are you afraid? How is it that you have no faith?"

I now, much more regularly, tell brothers and sisters in Christ what the Lord is showing me, but I noticed in myself a few years back a tendency to edit myself when talking with people outside the church. I began fighting that tendency and am now much more regularly and casually, include Jesus in my conversations with everyone. You don't need to take a class. You don't need to read a book. You just need to be willing to tell people what the Lord has done for you.

So, what do you do for a world in pain? You tell people you know and people you meet, as the Holy Spirit nurtures you, leads you, and empowers you, what great things the Lord has done for you. Consider starting by simply including the Lord in your conversations with others. You never know how much a simple word, like a mustard seed, might grow and overtake the heart of an individual—or even an entire region.

You're the man

The gospel of Mark will not let us see discipleship apart from mission to the world. Mark 5:1-20 invites us to consider whether the Lord is asking us to bring the gospel to territory that's new to us. On the one hand, it raises the specter of resistance and opposition. On the other hand, it assures of the superior power of the Son of the Most High God. In the man from the tombs, Mark 5:1-20 shows us a picture of a world in pain.

Whether we respond to the invitation of the passage may depend on whether we see in the man from the tombs not only a picture of the world but a picture of ourselves. For our mission to the world begins with Jesus' mission to us. Jesus' risky mission to the other side of the sea ended up being for one person only. He has come to the other side of the sea to meet you in the death of your life, take on the worst of your afflictions, and liberate you from the tombs. Oh, you still have pain—but it's pain with life, pain with hope, and pain that identifies with the pain of the world. It's pain with freedom, pain with passion, and pain with love. What great things the Lord has done for you. How he has had mercy on you.

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