

The Man Living Among the Tombs Sunday, 7/5/20

Let's just admit that the account of Jesus and the man who was living among the tombs is a strange one with some real difficulties. It's so strange, we might be tempted to skip over it, except that Mark, Matthew, and Luke all thought it was important enough to include in their Gospels. The question of demon possession is particularly difficult for modern ears, because it doesn't seem to fit with our scientific, reductionist view of the world, although I think it's interesting that some are willing to whole-heartedly embrace prayers for physical healing and the resurrection of Jesus, while at the same time refusing to accept the possibility of demon possession.

Was the wild man at the tombs simply mentally ill, just another person afflicted by illness in need of healing? Perhaps, but consider this:

In Mark's Gospel, this narrative occurs immediately after Jesus and his disciples get out of the boat after crossing the Sea of Galilee, when Jesus astonished them all by calming the raging wind and waves. Do you remember how that account ended? We read in Mark 4:41, "The disciples were absolutely terrified. 'Who is this man?'" they asked each other. 'Even the wind and waves obey him!'"¹

If you remember from our Lenten series earlier this year, that one line summarizes the basic question of the Gospel of Mark: Who is this man? The answer, of course, is found in the very first line of Mark's Gospel: "This is the Good News about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God." In other words, since Jesus is not only a man, but also the Messiah, the Son of God, we can expect him to do supernatural things. In fact, the more supernatural the better, because those are exactly the kinds of proofs people wanted to be convinced that Jesus wasn't just one more inspired rabbi making the lecture circuit.

Is it essential that you accept that the man at the tombs was possessed by demons? Perhaps not. The essential fact of his healing remains and his deliverance from that which imprisoned him remains, no matter what the cause of his affliction. Does it change your understanding of the divinity of Jesus, or your view of the truth or authority of Scripture? I can't answer those questions for you, but encourage you to wrestle with questions like these,

¹ Mark 4:41. New Living Translation (2nd Edition)

because ultimately every reading of the inspired Word of God is an attempt to receive and be molded by God's revealed truth. God wants us to be active participants in getting there, because our deepening relationship with God, God's Word, and God's people is where the action is, not at arriving at all the correct answers.

Let's continue the story of Jesus and the man at the tombs now, which gets even stranger. I'm reading from the Gospel of Mark, Chapter 5, picking up in verse 11 in The New Living translation. {Read Mark 5:11-20 NLT}

How strange is this story? Let me count the many ways. It's set in a Gentile territory, which isn't a place Jews would normally hang out, so right away we know that Jesus was leading the Disciples on a surprising missionary adventure. It's set in the vicinity of a cemetery, which isn't a place Jews would be allowed to hang out. In fact, I wonder if anyone, Gentiles or Jews, would have wanted to wander near tombs in the dead of night. Did you remember that this fateful crossing of the Sea of Galilee was at night? It's the perfect setting for a scary ghost story!

The man who ran out of the cemetery must have been quite a sight, because not only was he living in the burial caves, but he was also cutting himself with sharp stones. He must have been dirty, scarred, bleeding, and we know that he was screaming and running toward Jesus and the disciples. Add to that image now a large herd of pigs, at one moment in time alive and well, and then suddenly all dead and floating in the lake, with a nervous crowd begging Jesus to go somewhere else and stop bothering them- hardly the response we expect from ordinary people after witnessing one of Jesus' miracles. That's got to be one of the strangest stories in the Gospels. I can't help but wonder: Why did the demons ask to go into the pigs? Why did Jesus say yes? Why did the pigs drown themselves? Wasn't Jesus concerned about the enormous economic damage inflicted on the owners of the herd? The questions and potential answers are endless, but probably not so important for understanding who this Jesus is and what it is that he had done for the man living among the tombs.

Let's start with trying to relate to the predicament of the wild man. We know that he had often been physically bound, presumably because of his predilection for howling and cutting himself. The only reason he was able to run out to meet Jesus was that he apparently had supernatural strength that allowed him to break his manacles and shackles. He must also

have been emotionally and spiritually bound, because healthy, free people don't choose to live like that. Setting aside the question of demon possession, are there any ways that we're afflicted today that are even remotely similar?

Some of us are physically bound, not by manacles and shackles, but by our very bodies. The human body is a miraculous creation, one that we still only understand at very basic levels. Is it any wonder then that there are so many things that can go wrong with them? Think of your own body. In what ways do the realities of your bodily limits constrain what you choose to do? When we're young, physical immaturity keeps us from functioning as adults. In later adulthood, aging strips away our ability to fully engage in all the adult activities we enjoyed when we were in our physical prime. Some of us are born with inherited conditions that limit us, most of us develop various diseases over our lifetimes that burden and scar us, and all of us suffer in various degrees from accidents that either temporarily or permanently impair the way our bodies function. Pandemics have a way of reminding us that none of us can count on the physical health we have today lasting into tomorrow. Is there something about your physical health that's got you trapped?

Or perhaps it's your emotions that have you trapped. We know that our emotional wellness and our physical wellness are tightly interconnected. Fear, anxiety, anger, depression, and loneliness can all impair our physical health, and vice-versa. Most Americans have a difficult time maintaining our physical health, and maintaining our mental health seems to be even more difficult. Once again, pandemics have a way of making emotional problems we've been managing to cope with become overwhelming existential threats. For example, we're only just beginning to witness the consequences of the escalation of the epidemic of loneliness that was already ravaging our country before the pandemic. Is there an emotional struggle that has you bound, living alone among the tombs?

And then there's our spiritual health, which is in turn interconnected with our physical and emotional health. Distraction from our spiritual disciplines, physical separation from our church family, disillusionment with institutional religion and religious leaders, and cynicism are all a common feature of the pandemic. Have you been there? Are you there now? I don't know about you, but when I'm feeling depressed, I have a difficult time hearing God or even desiring to seek God. When I'm in physical pain, I have a difficult time focusing my mind

on anything but the pain itself. Pandemics have a way of teaching us that the time to build spiritual resilience is not in the midst of a crisis like losing a spouse. Are you struggling spiritually, feeling disconnected from God and God's people?

Jesus gave the man living among the tombs a second chance at life, like taking a rusty old Model T Roadster and restoring it to factory-new condition. Wouldn't it be nice if Jesus immediately answered our prayers by simply casting out our physical, emotional, and spiritual afflictions, as simply and immediately as he healed that man, erasing them forever? Wouldn't it be nice if he made our lives shiny and new again, the way we remember life used to be? It could and it does happen that way sometimes, so do keep running to Jesus and asking for deliverance. Just remember that the man Jesus healed didn't really return to a normal life at all. The deliverance of Jesus didn't return him to normal, but transformed him into an evangelist- a sharer of the Good News of Jesus Christ, much in the same way Brian Gilson was transformed and shared the Good News with us through his testimony last week.

But sometimes the healing happens later than we'd prefer, and it starts more subtly, with a deepening of our dependence on God and the people God sends to us to help us carry our burdens. Sometimes the healing happens much later, not until we've received our new resurrection bodies. Sometimes the healing is a change of our perspective, granting us the gift of seeing our suffering within a large context of God's plan, or seeing how God will redeem our pain to bring good into the world. And sometimes we're simply overwhelmed by our pain, and we have to rely on the faith of others to cover us in prayer until we can begin to walk toward the light of God's presence again.

Wherever you are in your struggles, whatever it is that has you manacled and shackled, living among the dead, wandering the hills and howling in your pain, know this. Jesus knows exactly who you are, where you are, and what you're enduring. And even when you can't sense God's presence, in those times God truly is carrying you. We worship a God of second chances who delights in redeeming brokenness, and God will bring healing and wholeness to you.

[SHARE: Reflection Slide] Please take a minute now to reflect on how you're trapped in life and what Jesus can deliver you from. If you like, you can share a comment or a prayer on Facebook.



Bill Reinhart, Pastor
pastorbill@buffaloumc.com