

How do we hear this story whose assumptions about reality we do not share? Perhaps best as a comic dramatic work using buffoonery and crude characterization and a ludicrously improbable scenario. This story lies somewhere between a political cartoon and a graphic novel.

Let me explain. The whole scene is bizarre. You have a naked crazy guy, chatty demons, stampeding pigs diving off a cliff into the sea like lemmings, tombs, chains, shackles, freaked-out locals, and a small riot. All in Gentile territory where, as far as Luke was concerned, Jesus had no business being.

The folk who first heard this story must have loved it. In addition to the great action and dialogue, there was ancient regional rivalry. What could be more fun for the good Jews of Galilee to hear than a story about how un-kosher, unlucky, and generally weird the gentiles on the other side of the lake were?

Then there was the political subtext. Everybody knew instantly both that it was no accident that the demons called themselves “Legion” after the famous and feared Roman legions, or that pigs were a staple of both the Roman army and the Roman economy. The scene openly characterizes Roman imperialism as demonic possession.

Caesar’s legions and Caesar’s rations are drowned in the Sea of Galilee, just as Pharaoh’s army was drowned in the Red (Reed) Sea while chasing the freed Israelite slaves. Can you hear the snickers surfing across Luke’s audience breaking into raucous cheers?

As delightful as all this is, this is much more than a mildly comic interlude in Jesus’ Galilean ministry. It is really good news, and good news about power, all sorts of power.

The Gerasene demoniac appears just after the account of Jesus calming the storm on the lake. In fact, the storm was on the very same trip that took Jesus and the disciples to Gerasene. The calming of the storm and of the disciples’ fear, is accompanied by the calming of the storm within the tortured soul of the grave dweller.

There are a lot of powers at work in the world, powers that can, and do, hurt and isolate and torment and destroy in all sorts of ways. We live in a dangerous and frightening world, a world that seems at both first and second glance to be hostile to grocery shoppers, children attending school, parishioners attending potluck suppers at church.

The Gerasene demoniac had more to worry about than his demons. He was also a pariah, cut off from family, friends, community, relationships and from all those connections that together weave the fabric of our humanity. That isolation, that apart-ness, was also the

victory of powers, perhaps powers we humans create, powers that can destroy as effectively, and as completely, as madness or storms.

By the time Jesus got through with the man made mad by powers beyond his control, he was on the other side, not of just the lake but of his captivity as well. He was in his right mind, dressed appropriately, socially engaged, and Jesus told him to go home, a home he didn't have when our story began. He was given the fullness of his life back.

This is part of what Paul is talking about when he insists that, in Christ, "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female." Paul is saying that these distinctions, and others, these powers of the social, economic, ecclesiastical, and political structures, as ancient, hallowed, destructive, and potent as they were, and as they are, these powers have fallen and will fall.

Remember Jesus' mission statement: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring glad tidings to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free . . ." (Luke 4:18)

The demonic voices of Jesus' day and of ours—the purveyors of hate, of lies, of death—are not the strongest voices. They may at times sound the loudest but they are not the strongest, and they will not have the last word. It is our vocation to oppose them, and by God's grace they should not, and ultimately they cannot, separate, isolate, define, or destroy us.

The demonic powers, then and now, flourish when we lose our minds, when their gaslighting makes us doubt we can any longer know what is good, real, and true. It is our vocation to be in our right mind, to recover the vision of human community freed from distinctions that demean others, to realize that we are already one in the fullness of our humanity.