

## **There is Hope in Christ**

**June 20, 2010**

**Luke 8:26-39**

**Listen now for the reading of God's Word for the people of God.**

<sup>26</sup>They sailed to the region of the Gerasenes, which is across the lake from Galilee. <sup>27</sup>When Jesus stepped ashore, he was met by a demon-possessed man from the town. For a long time this man had not worn clothes or lived in a house, but had lived in the tombs. <sup>28</sup>When he saw Jesus, he cried out and fell at his feet, shouting at the top of his voice, "What do you want with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I beg you, don't torture me!" <sup>29</sup>For Jesus had commanded the evil spirit to come out of the man. Many times it had seized him, and though he was chained hand and foot and kept under guard, he had broken his chains and had been driven by the demon into solitary places.

<sup>30</sup>Jesus asked him, "What is your name?"

"Legion," he replied, because many demons had gone into him. <sup>31</sup>And they begged him repeatedly not to order them to go into the Abyss.

<sup>32</sup>A large herd of pigs was feeding there on the hillside. The demons begged Jesus to let them go into them, and he gave them permission. <sup>33</sup>When the demons came out of the man, they went into the pigs, and the herd rushed down the steep bank into the lake and was drowned.

<sup>34</sup>When those tending the pigs saw what had happened, they ran off and reported this in the town and countryside, <sup>35</sup>and the people went out to see what had happened. When they came to Jesus, they found the man from whom the demons had gone out, sitting at Jesus' feet, dressed and in his right mind; and they were afraid. <sup>36</sup>Those who had seen it told the people how the demon-possessed man had been cured. <sup>37</sup>Then all the people of the region of the Gerasenes asked Jesus to leave them, because they were overcome with fear. So he got into the boat and left.

<sup>38</sup>The man from whom the demons had gone out begged to go with him, but Jesus sent him away, saying, <sup>39</sup>"Return home and tell how much God has done for you." So the man went away and told all over town how much Jesus had done for him.

**This is the Word of God and It can be trusted. Thanks be to God.**

*Let us pray:*

*Almighty, ever-living God, You give strength to the weary and new courage to those who have lost heart. Hear the prayers of all who call on You in any trouble that they may have the joy of receiving Your help in their need. May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be pleasing in your sight, O LORD, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen!*

I remember viewing several films in the late 80's and early 90's that dealt with the theme of homosexuality and those affected by HIV/AIDS. During that time very little was known about the infliction and society's stance was that HIV = AIDS = Death and that was simply the way it was. To even begin to think that people affected by HIV/AIDS could live long healthy lives was incomprehensible and cast a social stigma on individuals with a negative imagery so strong that people would panic at not only the sheer thought of being infected by HIV, but also at simply being in the same room with someone who was infected.

One particular movie that comes to mind is one that I don't care for very much. The acting was bad, the humor was horrid and the simple story line was nothing more than shocking and ridiculous. But nearly 16 years after its release, I am beginning to find some way to react to what I saw in this movie. *It's My Party*, released in 1996, is a story of a man who finds himself diagnosed with as HIV positive and in turn his whole world begins to crumble beneath him. His boyfriend leaves him, long term treatment is not yet an option and in time he develops lesions on his brain that are causing him to go blind. Not exactly the life that Nick had planned for himself, but as many of us have come to know, our life plans are rarely as we have envisioned them to be. The Reverend Linda Veltheim often reminds her students that "God is God and you are not." How wonderfully inspiring and equally alarming these words are. To truly live is to die to our ways and to trust in God's Will and Way for our lives.

Just four days ago, Sarah D. Bunting had these words to say about the movie:

*It's My Party is also instructive as a period piece of sorts, and I don't mean the shoulder pads on everyone. As Nick reviews his cross-shaped art installation, fashioned from pictures of his many friends who have died of AIDS, I remembered how we thought about AIDS then. The movie came out in 1996, which seems like the time that the diagnosis stopped signifying an absolute, non-negotiable, short-date death sentence; the transition had begun, I think, into considering it a manageable chronic condition. Nick isn't ending his life because of the diagnosis itself — he has lesions on his brain that may kill him within the week, and will certainly render him non compos mentis — but I for one forget sometimes the way it terrified us. Terrorized us, really; laid waste to people, literally and figuratively. <http://tomatonation.com/culture-and-criticism/its-my-party/>*

In our text for today, we have the equally gripping and haunting story of a man who gave up on life. This is one of the Bible stories that sticks with you and grips you. Rather than take his own life, as Nick does in the movie *It's My Party*, he retreated into the world of insanity. He could not cope with normal life so his mind forced him to escape into a world with demons and unclean spirits. He was a prisoner in his own body.

Verse 27 describes him as "a man of the city who had demons . . . For a long time he had worn no clothes, and he did not live in a house but in the tombs."

Some have speculated that his living among the tombs was a key to his psychological disorder. The psychologist Myron Madden suggested that he suffered from unresolved grief and, therefore, sought relief among the dead. Dr. Karl Menninger said this man is a classic representation of "man against himself." He was filled with self-hatred, a self-hatred that had taken the form of self-abuse and self-destructive behavior. He was trying to destroy himself just as surely as Nick does when he sought medicinal assisted suicide from some of his closest friends. Mark's version of the story (Mark 5:5) includes this note, "Night and day among the tombs and on the mountains he was always howling and bruising himself with stones."

It is a disturbing picture, and more a picture of our lives than we'd want to admit, even to ourselves. We, too, are sometimes filled with a kind of self-hatred that leads us to self-destructive behavior. We, like this man, are unclean and alone, living in the isolation of a graveyard.

Today, we don't have very many people with the calm determination of Nick. We no longer have the idea that HIV/AIDS and its effect on our lives is an impending death sentence. We don't have many people howling in the graveyards. But we do have many people who not only are affected by HIV/AIDS but are also diagnosed with their own health concerns; cancer, blood disorders, migraines, loss of loved ones, strokes, MRSA infections, social injustice, imprisonment by means of a poor legal system that place those who have made a few poor choices on the same list as those who have committed heinous sexual predator offenses, and on and on and on goes the list of what many consider to be a means to self imprisonment; a justification for

placing themselves amongst the dead at times instead of standing with the living and holding to the promise the Christ is Bread of Life; offering hope to the hopeless, strength to those in their time of weakness and yes, even life to those who find themselves imprisoned by affliction, and social injustice.

Then there are those who, as a result of the world's pressure on their lives find themselves addicted to Oxycotin, crack cocaine, alcohol, prescription drugs, and perhaps hundreds of other substances that enslave us in self-destructive behaviors. Every week the newspapers are filled with stories of young people dying from a drug overdose or causing fatal accidents while under the influence of drugs. We are bent on destroying ourselves just as surely as the demon-possessed man. And others of us are equally self-destructive in less obvious ways. We insist on continuing those old patterns of behavior that have brought us nothing but misery for years. We keep doing the same self-defeating actions over and over and expecting different results. Someone has said that is the very definition of insanity.

Today, we read about this poor, demon-possessed man living among the tombstones and feel sorry for him, but he represents a dramatic picture of our own behavior. He is only different in degree from the rest of us. Though he has found himself living literally amongst the tombs of his community, we, too, find ourselves living in dark burial caves, slashing ourselves with one kind of stone or another. However figuratively and metaphorically they may be, the pain and damage we do to ourselves is just as real.

In the movie *Rent* there is a song called, *There's Only Us*, sung by a man who during a weekly group session is trying to come to terms with his HIV status. The Words go something like this, "I find some of what you teach suspect, because I'm used to relying on intellect, but I try to open up to what I don't know because reason says I should have died three years ago. There's only us, there's only this. Forget regret or life is yours to miss. No other road, no other way, no day but today." It's a beautiful song but we must not hold entirely to its words. As Christians we know that in times of heartache, pain and despair there is more than *just us*. There is a God in Heaven who has taken an interest in us, just as God has taken interest in this man in our reading today; so much interest that God goes out of the way for us. If you read the text carefully, you will discover

that Jesus made his way across the Sea of Galilee, healed this demon-possessed man, and immediately returned. It appears that Jesus' only purpose for crossing the lake was to help this one self-defeating individual. If Jesus cared so much for this man, then we can be assured that he wants to help each us just as much.

Our text shows us how difficult it is for a needy person to receive help. Verse 28 says, "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.'"

The only thing he can imagine God doing to him is punishing him. He doesn't fall down before Jesus asking for healing; rather he expects punishment and begs to be spared. Isn't it the same for many of us? Don't we also come before God expecting punishment? Haven't we been taught that our pain is the result of our own sin and that we should live our lives that way; expecting punishment rather than forgiveness and grace?

He thought Jesus was going to be like all the other "good citizens" of his city. All of them tormented him. Verse 29 says, "(For many times (the demon) 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 asked the spirit's name, and the man answered, "My name is Legion! For we are many." A legion of soldiers was numbered a couple of thousand, so this passage is often translated, "My name is Mob." Have you ever feel like you had a mob inside you? That there was a crowd of people inside you, not one? Have you ever feel there was a contest going on inside you with many forces vying for control? Have you ever feel like you had this "evil twin" inside and you didn't know who'd win?

When C.S. Lewis was on the road of conversion to Christ, the Spirit of God convicted him by showing him the awful truth about himself. He thought he was a happy, reasonably good pagan, but now this is what he saw:

*"For the first time I examined myself with a seriously practical purpose. And there I found what appalled me: a zoo of lusts, a bedlam of ambitions, a nursery of fears; a harem of fondled hatreds. My name was Legion."*

Perhaps the key to the whole story is the admonition that Christ offers this man, "Return to your home, and declare how much God has done for you." In our time of weakness and despair we are to concentrate on the blessings God has provided each of us and share them with those around us. This poor man is encouraged to focus on the positive, not the negative. His hope for continued healing and health comes from sharing what God has done for him.

All of us can find strength for living when we focus on the wonderful things God does for us. If we do, we will find ourselves moving, as this once demon possessed man moved; from shame to hope, from a life divided, compulsive and torn, to a life made whole and made one; one with a God who has expressed an interest in each and every one of us; regardless of our faith backgrounds, our infirmities, our political views and most certainly because of the one's we love and share our lives with.

"One God, One Love." That is what Jesus wants from each of us; to be one in God and one in love. What if we could find our center? Could we accomplish being one? Yes we could and we can. That center is Christ, to know him is to know our own true selves and to know and embrace our limitations, as well as our abilities. When Jesus is not Lord, anything or anyone can be. When Jesus is not Lord, we have a legion of forces vying for control.

But when Jesus is Lord, when he is our center, our friend, and our savior; then we become one. Won't you take the opportunity today to place Christ at the center of your life? Amen.

*(I am indebted to Dr. Mickey Anders of First Christian Church in Pikesville, Alabama and Dr. H. Stephen Shoemaker of Broadway Baptist Church in Fort Worth, Texas for some of the ideas in this sermon)*