

July 3, 2022

The Gospel of Luke
XXVII. The Location of Our Ministry
Luke 8:26-39

Dr. William P. Seel
Easley Presbyterian Church
Easley, South Carolina

After the great storm the disciples had experienced while crossing the lake – plus their amazement and fear at Jesus’ calming of that storm¹ – the disciples were no doubt hoping for a quiet arrival on that distant shore. But it was not to be. For no sooner have they beached the boat and set foot on dry land when they are immediately assailed by a new storm. Not wind and waves, this time, but a storm to be sure – in the form of a man possessed by an entire legion of demons. The way our text describes this man, he must have been an absolutely terrifying sight – certainly the locals thought so, as our text describes them keeping him under guard and in chains.

But Jesus, much as He was while sleeping in the boat during the previous storm, is not the least bit alarmed at the appearance of this man and his legion of demons. Instead, what Jesus is is kind and compassionate – and, once again as in the storm at sea, absolutely in control. He drives the demons out of that man with but a word – note that even the demons recognize that it is hopeless to think they might have even a chance of prevailing over the Son of the Most High God. He commands, and they are helpless to do anything but obey. Jesus sends them into a herd of nearby pigs, which then sends the pigs rushing down a steep bank into the lake – where they all drown, pigs and demons alike.

That is the first scene in our story – and I think the healing of this storm of a demon-possessed man speaks to us in much the same way as last week’s stilling of the storm at sea. Jesus has power over the storms which assail us. And He will not let them prevail over us. Jesus has power over the storms which assail us – and even though He will not necessarily prevent us from entering those storms, we may trust that He is always with us in those storms. And we may trust that He will always bring us safely through those storms – bringing even that storm eventually round to good. So, when storms of earth or sea, or mind or body, or just simply of life in this fallen world – whenever the storms arise, we need not be afraid. We can trust Jesus, and so possess peace, even as the storm winds blow. We need never be afraid – because there is no storm which can ever separate us from the love of our Savior. Nor from His power to deliver us through the storm.

So ends scene one, and now we enter into scene two. When the pig herders saw what had happened to their herd of pigs – how Jesus had cast the demons out of the man and into the pigs, and the pigs had then raced into the lake and drowned – well, the pig herders took to their heels and lit out full speed for town. And they told anybody and everybody they met along the way about what they had just seen. On this July 4th weekend, we can think of them as being something

like Paul Revere – except that instead of yelling out, “The British are coming!”, they were yelling, “Jesus is here and the demons are gone and the man is healed and the pigs are all drowned!” Which certainly got everyone’s attention. Before long, the whole of the Gerasene area had come out to see this for themselves.

And when they saw it – when they saw the formerly demon-possessed man sitting at the feet of Jesus, clothed in his right mind; and when they saw the dead pigs floating along the shore – when they saw all this, they immediately praised God and glorified Jesus and said to Him, one and all, “You have got to come and dine with us tonight!” No, of course they didn’t say that. What they said to Him, with trembling knees and trembling voices, was, *“Please go away from us. Please leave our region at once. Please just leave us alone!”*

Maybe it was because Jesus had single-handedly just wrecked the futures market for pork bellies for the next several years. Even we get upset when Jesus starts messing with our Mammon – I mean, money.² Maybe it was because Jesus was an Israelite, and the last thing the Gerasenes needed was a trouble-making Israelite on their hands. But I suspect it was something much deeper than both those things – akin to what the disciples were feeling in that boat after Jesus had stilled the storm with just a word. A terrifyingly demon-possessed man was a level of chaos the Gerasenes were apparently willing to live with. After all, they could chain him up to gain some control over the situation. But Jesus – they recognized in Jesus a power they could never control, not even contain. A power that could easily turn their lives upside-down in an instant – and there would be nothing at all they could do to stop it. They recognized something that the Bible proclaims, but which we sometimes forget – which is that it can be a *“fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.”*³

Remember, last week, we talked about how following Jesus sometimes meant actually being led by Him into a storm, rather than out of a storm – the sort of thing that just can easily happen when we begin to take seriously His commandments on how we are to live. Jesus once said that *“You shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.”*⁴ But from our human perspective, it can often seem more like, *“You shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you odd, different, turn your life upside-down, complicate rather than comfort.”* When we truly begin to reckon with just who Jesus truly is – and so, begin to take seriously the thought that we should actually be doing what He tells us to do – well, being transformed by Jesus instead of just easily conformed to the world can be a rather unsettling bit of business, at least at first. It can certainly be a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God – and I think that is what was really going on when the Gerasenes together told Jesus just to go away. Just as it is when you and I do our best to keep Jesus at arm’s length from our daily living and from our life priorities.

I told a Peter Marty story last week about teaching his daughter how to float in the swimming pool as a parable for what it meant to trust Jesus. Here’s another of his stories – take it as a parable for what it means to fall into the hands of the living God, as the Gerasenes find that they now have. Marty and his wife were about to go hiking at the Grant Teton National Park, and they were at the Visitor’s Center to receive the bear safety instructions from Ranger Rick – which actually was his name. Ranger Rick talked about using bear repellent spray, which he said was about 99 percent effective provided you let the bear get to within thirty feet of you before using it. Marty began wondering who in their right mind would ever have the self-control to wait for the

bear to get that close! Then Ranger Rick said that if the spray doesn't work, the best thing to do is to lie face down on the ground and play dead. Plant your face in the dirt with your hands on your neck, legs spread slightly. *"Oh," said Ranger Rick, "and if you have a backpack, keep it on. It creates more distance between you and the bear."*

Marty says that the more Ranger Rick spoke, the more obvious it became: that risk is inevitable if you want to get close to nature. *"If you're risk averse," he writes, "keep your distance. Sightsee from your car. Study wild animals in a magazine."* At which point Marty, being a preacher after all, began to see in this bear safety guide a parable of what it means for us to draw near to the living God:

When I reflected later on this obvious truth, it struck me that the same reality holds true for our relationship with God. If you want to get close to the Lord, there are risks involved. You become part of a people who don't look exactly like you and whose company may unsettle you. You throw your money behind causes larger than your next Amazon purchase. You take to heart Jesus' mandate about feeding kids who don't ask to be hungry.

If you want to avoid the risks associated with getting close to the Lord, keep your distance. You can choose to talk about God, which is what a lot of religions . . . do. If you want to get close to the Lord, prepare for some vulnerability, and be open to letting faith splay you wide open. Risky as loving this One may be, it's our only way of getting near to the grace and mercy we so desperately need.⁵

"It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God" – which is perhaps exactly what the Gerasenes perceived in that lakeshore tableau of the newly delivered man and all those dead pigs. But what the Gerasenes clearly failed to perceive, as they ushered Jesus out of their territory, was that it is only by allowing ourselves to fall into His hands that we are ever actually made safe, ever actually saved.

Scene three. The man who had been possessed by the demons watches as Jesus and the disciples pack up the boat and prepare to sail back across the lake. And he then begins to beg Jesus to be allowed to get into that boat with Him – to follow Jesus wherever He is going. But Jesus has a different plan in mind for this man. *"Return to your home,"* Jesus tells him, *"and declare how much God has done for you."* This Gerasene former demoniac, in other words, is made by Jesus the first evangelist to the Gentiles. *"Go home and tell them all that God has done for you."* Which the man then does: *"And he went away, proclaiming throughout the whole city how much Jesus had done for him."*

The location of our ministry, in response to what Jesus has done for us. Sometimes, we get it into our heads that in order to really serve Jesus we have to go somewhere else, do something completely different and completely bigger somehow. But listen to what Jesus says to this man: *"Return to your home, and declare how much God has done for you."* He doesn't tell him to take up a new vocation, nor a new location. Instead, Jesus tells him that the best place he can be of service – the location of his ministry – is in the place where he already lives, doing the work he

has always done, simply by bearing witness to the people in his daily encounters about how much God has done for him.

Which counters another bad idea which sometimes gets into our heads – that only what we do on Sunday morning is sacred and matters to God. And that what we do during the week is secular and doesn't matter to God. Jesus draws no such division. The location of our ministry, the place where we best serve Jesus, is in the places we already are, doing the things we already do – but now being and doing in such a way that we show forth to others the difference Jesus has made and is making in our lives. Live out our faith, show to others our resurrection – and, when the opportunity is given, even telling others what Jesus has done for us. “*‘Return to your home, and declare how much God has done for you.’ And he went away, proclaiming throughout the whole city how much Jesus had done for him.*” The location of our ministry in response to Jesus is, most often, right here in our lives as they already are.

Here's just one little story to illustrate – a pastor tells of boarding an airport shuttle bus to get from the terminal to the rental car lot. He notes how driving an airport shuttle bus is a thankless job – especially since people are nearly always grumpy on shuttle buses and in a hurry to get to somewhere else. No one talks on shuttle buses except to give their destination to the driver. But not on this particular shuttle bus, he said:

The man who drove the bus was an absolute delight. He was scanning the curbside, looking for anybody who needed a ride. “You know,” he told us, “I’m always looking because sometimes people are running late. You can tell it in their eyes. I’m always looking because I never want to miss one. Hey, here’s another one! . . .”

The driver pulled over to pick up a latecomer, and he was so excited about what he was doing that we got excited. We were actually cheering him on when he was picking people up. It was like watching Jesus drive a shuttle bus. The man would grab people’s luggage before they could lift it, then he would jump back on the bus and say, “Well, we’re off. I know you’re all eager to get there as quickly as possible, so I’m going to get you there as soon as I can.”

Jaded commuters put down their papers. He created such a little community of joy on that bus that people wanted to ride around in the terminal a second time just to hang out with the guy. We would say to people who got on after us, “Watch this guy!” He wasn’t just our shuttle bus driver – he was our leader; he was our friend. And for a few moments, community flourished. On a shuttle bus for a rental car company . . .⁶

The pastor, before he got off, eventually had a chance to ask the bus driver about all of this, about what motivated him to do what he was doing the way he was doing it. The answer which came back was the heart of simplicity: Jesus. The bus driver said he did this for Jesus, who had done so much for him.

“Return to your home, and declare how much God has done for you.” Not somewhere else, but right here in our lives as they are – the location of our ministry. With deeds which show how God is working in us; with words which declare how God’s grace has lifted us up and changed us. And with hearts grateful to God for how He has set us free.

¹ Luke 8:22-25.

² Matthew 6:24.

³ Hebrews 10:31.

⁴ John 8:32.

⁵ Peter W. Marty, “Getting close is risky,” *Christian Century*, Vol. 136, No. 24 (November 20, 2019), p. 3.

⁶ John Ortberg, *The Me I Want to Be* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), pp. 13-14.