

[Read Mark 5:1-20](#)

When we come to a story like this it seems to be some sort of relic. If you're new to the faith and this is the story you read, you might be like, "See, this is why I don't read the Bible. This is why I don't do this church thing."

Let's consider one layer deeper than what's going on here. Because I actually think the Bible has a far more nuanced and complex view of reality than we tend to give it credit for. We, as modernist, just want to impose modern categories on the text and assume that they just lump everything together—different diseases and mental health and other issues—they just called it all demon-possessed. The Bible actually does have a more nuanced view of the reality of what's going on in the world.

If you are absolutely sure beyond a shadow of a doubt that God does not exist, then it is logical to make the step that demons do not exist. But the overwhelming majority of research says that most people at least leave open the possibility of the existence of God. We speak about things in ways that there must be something beyond just the surface. There still is, in the ethos of our day, a pull towards the supernatural.

There are like a gazillion Marvel movies, which are all about a sort of transcendence. Think of the way we speak of love. You can't put love into a lab, dissect it, and figure it out there. There is something in the way we speak that says there's a possibility that there's more to life than just what's on the surface. If you are willing to leave room for the possibility that God could exist, whatever language we want to put on it in the modern world. Then it's actually very illogical and incoherent to say the opposite is not true.

If there is supernatural good, the logical conclusion is that supernatural evil would also exist. And that becomes a more coherent worldview to understand those things. Now again, I think part of the obstacle we have to overcome is we think we're more intelligent than these biblical writers. But these guys were pretty quick; they were pretty sharp. But we might think that they just didn't have all of the different categories of illnesses.

Look at [Matthew 4:24](#). This is as Jesus is beginning his ministry. Now all of those different descriptors in this verse are not synonyms. You see, the biblical writers actually had a way to delineate all of these different things. Diseases, severe pain, demon-possessed, seizures, and the paralyzed are all different categories in which they could delineate all the afflictions and illnesses.

The word seizures is actually a really hard word in the Greek to translate. The King James version describes it as a lunatic. Lunatic has become a pejorative for us. That's not the way they would speak about that word in

the generations before us. And what they're alluding to there is mental illness. You see, the Bible is actually incredibly intelligent, complex, and nuanced in the way it speaks about affliction. Each of these afflictions are different categories. You can have illness, you can have pain, and you can have mental health issues. You can also have demon-possessed.

The Bible actually speaks about it in a way that recognizes both the humanity and material element of affliction and brokenness. But it also says there is something supernatural going on. Demon possession was not a bucket in which they threw everything in. It was something distinct and delineated from all these other things. If we give the scriptures a chance, we'll recognize that they were far more nuanced and complex than even our modern understanding of the world.

If your worldview is only a material kind of humanist view with the only things that exist being what you can feel with your five senses, you don't have a category for the sort of atrocities and evil that we see and feel that there's something more going on beneath the surface. You look at something like the Uvalde shooting, and all of us feel a gut reaction that says that it is a deeper evil. Historically you look at the ways in the ways in which we have just been brutal to humanity across history. You think of something like the Holocaust. Certainly, there's some sort of deep evil underneath the surface that isn't just a material world.

I would suggest if you come with just a material worldview and have no conception for anything that may happen and be animating people behind the scenes, you actually have a less complex and less nuanced view of reality. The scriptures suggest that there's more going on beneath the surface. There's more there that we feel in our gut, a visceral reaction to the atrocities. I wonder if the scriptures provide us a vocabulary to be able to name some of those things.

Now, this isn't to reduce all things; all of those different issues that I suggested, something like Uvalde, we can't reduce it into a purely material solution or purely a spiritual solution. There is human autonomy. There's human choice as well as a sort of pull and principalities and powers that Paul talked about that are both interminglings. And so, our solutions have to be just as complex and nuanced. Our world wants to divide us into either/or. Do this or do that. It is far more complex and nuanced.

What we see in the text is essentially a story of Jesus entering into that nuance. He's entering into that complexity. He's beginning to confront and disrupt people with the recognition of what's happening on the surface, as well as what's happening beneath the surface. So I would suggest that this story is not just a true story. I think it's actually a brilliantly written piece of literature. It is almost functioning at the level of satire that's helping us to understand the true events that took place.

But also helps us understand what's happening beneath the surface that most of us either ignore or coast by. And so, let's just come to the text with fresh eyes. It's strange. But I wonder if it actually has a bit more to say to our world than we're used to.

If you remember, last Sunday, Sandy talked about Jesus crossing the sea. He was crossing from the Jewish area over to what's called the Decapolis. That's a literary device Mark uses that whenever he crosses the sea, it's symbolic of him going from a predominantly Jewish area to a predominantly Gentile area.

And so he is playing off of this to allow us to see Jesus crossing over into the space, which the Jews would've been hesitant and downright angry that the gospel was going there. No wonder the trek there was a bit tumultuous. No wonder the storm was a bit wild with the gospel expanding across the sea.

So to the Jews, this was a Roman-occupied area. The Decapolis was a set of ten cities that was established by Alexander the Great, and then after Alexander the Great, the Romans came in and occupied that whole area wiping out what Alexander the Great had established. And now it's a Roman-occupied area, and for the Jews, Rome was pure evil. They would equate them to something as despicable as pigs; let's keep that in mind.

The sea was chaos to them, and they would've liked nothing more than to watch the Roman pigs, who had come in and ruled with an iron fist, they would have like nothing more than to watch the Roman pigs be pushed back into the chaos of the sea and done away with. This is the world that Mark is bringing us into.

[Mark 5:1-5](#) A bit of a gnarly start to the story. Jesus lands, and Mark's very clear that this man who lives among the tombs sees him. Now think of the literary tool Mark's using with that word "see." He's often said those with eyes, may they see. And those with ears, may they hear. This man, who lives among the tombs, sees Jesus. He's off in the distance, and he begins to run towards him. We learn a bit about this man. We learn that he's chaotic. He's lived in the tombs. He exists there probably because they wouldn't allow him to live anywhere else. So he is living in the tombs. The townspeople had tried to restrain him. They tried to hold him back, but he keeps breaking the chains.

It says night and day he was crying out in anguish. So much so that he turned to self-harm and would cut himself. He was uncontrollable. For Jesus and the Jewish people, not only was he a Gentile, which would've deemed him unclean, but he lived among the dead, which would've made him additionally unclean. And so you see this man whose community deserted him. He's in deep anguish. He's been isolated. He's in pain. He's bleeding. He has all this chaos going on within him. But it says that when he sees Jesus, he runs at him.

[Mark 5:6](#) Mark is really creative here. If you remember, from the first week of this series, I said that no human character would correctly identify Jesus as the Son of the Most High God until the very end when a Roman soldier does. But yet, what we see over and over is the supernatural realm, the demons; they are able to recognize who Jesus is. And

so the demons recognize they're in the presence of someone whose authority and power is greater than theirs. And they cry out and say, "You are Son of the Most High God."

That title would've been a title used in the Roman world to signify the highest god in the Roman Pantheon. And yet here, the demons are saying, "No, you are the Son of the Most High God." And these demons identify correctly who Jesus is. They recognize the authority and the supremacy of Jesus, but you almost get the sense, don't you, that they're a bit shocked to see him.

I was talking with Sandy Hughes this week. She loves this story. She was saying, one of the things she loves about this story is that when Jesus arrives on the shore, she's often wondered if the demons thought Jesus wasn't going to make it through the storm. Like, were they surprised that he was able to calm the storm? And it doesn't say this, it is me elaborating, but you almost wonder if they saw off in the distance Jesus and the disciples working through the storm, maybe they began to realize who this Jesus is. And so when he lands, they recognize that Jesus had power and authority over creation.

What we see here is Jesus is going to demonstrate power and authority over the spiritual realm. And what you'll see next week is Jesus having power and authority over disease, illness, and even death. This little section is a sort of tour de force of Jesus' power. And Mark is demonstrating it at every level.

He's saying, whether it's the created order, the spiritual order, disease, illness, or even death itself, Jesus has more power and more authority over those things. And so these demons, they see the man and they run after him. [Mark 5:7](#)

This is interesting because in the ancient world, it was believed when you would come up against demonic forces like that, if you could name the other first, you would assert dominance over that thing. And so Mark, very creatively, with that in mind, he's saying that it seems like the demons get the upper hand. They're naming Jesus as the Son of the Most High God, but he pulls a little Tarantino here. [Mark 5:8](#) So that means it happened before the demons cried out.

See, Jesus takes the upper hand. He calls out the reality of the impure spirit within this man. And in response to that, they say, "Don't torture us." [Mark 5:9](#) And this is the epic scene. This is where the lights go down, and it gets eerie and dark. This is terrifying. Like, if you're standing with someone and they're like, "My name is Legion, and they start talking in the third person, plural. Yeah, you might want to find a way out.

[Mark 5:10](#) The term Legion would've had one meaning in Mark's day. And the only meaning it would've had was for a group of Roman soldiers. A legion of Roman soldiers would've been about 5,000 to 6,000 soldiers. So this idea of him having a demon possession is far more like having demons possession, plural. There's a lot going on in this man.

The assumption is that there are 5,000 to 6,000 demons possessing him, and these demons are now encountering Jesus. And then you get this strange verse in. [Mark 5:11](#) You see, it's like these demons are almost like a parasite. Like they need a host in which they can live. And there's

a sense in which they could travel freely about, but it's almost akin to like a home town. Like this was their area. This was the region in which they existed.

It's kind of like if you ever walk into an area and you feel a sort of weight and oppression about the place, it's similar to that. This Legion resides in a particular space at a particular time, and they beg him not to send them out of the region. What I think we're getting at here is this idea that to have them leave that region would've actually stripped them of power and authority. Their power was limited to a particular context. They said, "Don't send us out of there. Let us stay somewhere in here." And look at what Jesus says in [Mark 5:12-13](#).

Isn't this a fascinatingly odd scene? Now there's a herd of 2000 pigs, and they're requesting of Jesus something, and I find it so fascinating at what Jesus does in verse 13. He gave them permission. He grants the request. "You guys want to go in the pigs? Sure." He gives them permission. Just envision that scene. It is wild. The language there is that he dismissed them. He dismissed the spirits, and they rush into which, again, I just like to imagine there are 2000 pigs, let's just call it for the sake of math, 6,000 demons. Those are some crazy pigs going down the hill. Each of them possessed by multiple demons as well as they just rush down the bank into the sea.

[Mark 5:14](#) Can you imagine them going to their boss and being like, "So this is going to sound crazy, but I lost the whole herd." The people come out to see what happened. That feels natural. That's what we would do. We would hear of a story like that, and we'd want to go explore it.

[Mark 5:15-16](#) Remember, the town had tried to restrain him. They knew this man. They had cast him into the tombs. There's a history here in which this man had been ostracized. He'd been sent out from the town. They were very aware of him. And so, when they arrive on the scene, I imagine those tending the pigs said, "Not only did that happen to this herd, but you remember that guy that we got rid of a while back? You'll never believe what's happened to him."

[Mark 5:17](#) Interestingly, they too are in recognition of who Jesus is. They recognize his power. They recognize the authority, the impulse, the disruption he's bringing to the people in this area. And I think, naturally, it swells up as fear. Just like the disciples, when they encounter Jesus calming the storm, it says they were afraid. They were terrified. In the same way, all these townspeople see the man dressed in his right mind, and there's a sense of fear because they recognize the power and authority of Jesus.

Here now is the second time someone is making a request of Jesus. The townspeople are now saying, "Get out of here. What are you doing here? Leave." And notice Jesus' response again in [verse 18](#). He obliges and he grants the request. Isn't that interesting? There is one more request made of Jesus that I think will have a shocking response.

[Mark 5:19](#) Isn't that interesting? The man who has just been fully restored, dressed, and in his right mind with his dignity. Everything about this man had been restored. And, of course, he says, "Jesus, let me come with you." He makes a request, which, by the way, that's the same

phrase that Mark used when Jesus called the disciples and said, "Will you come with me?" It is this man saying, "I want to be your disciple." What is Jesus' response to this request? "No." He grants the request of the demons. He grants the request of the townspeople rejecting him. But for this man, who wants to be Jesus' disciple, he says no. He is already a disciple of Jesus. We can see that, but I think what Jesus is getting at is there is for this man a different task.

Remember, he's in Gentile territory. Where those disciples were doing the work of the Kingdom of God on the other side of the sea, Jesus said to this man, "You must go to your own people. I have transformed your life. Now go transform the area to which you go." Jesus is saying that not everyone is called to be those 12 disciples, but rather this man has now been given a story to go and witness to the area around him.

This is a bit of conjecture, so take it with a grain of salt, but Jesus will return back to the Decapolis. And in chapter seven, he is going to be met by crowds of people who are coming to Jesus, wanting to be healed, ready to listen to his teaching. This demon-possessed man, as best as we can tell, outside of Jesus, is the first missionary to take the message of the Kingdom of God to those in that land. And I wonder, I just wonder if when this one man goes back to the Decapolis and begins to tell his story, is it all that crazy to think that he started a movement so that by chapter seven, crowds are coming, open and attentive to the message of Jesus, because of this man's story. His life had been radically changed. There's a call for all of us in there.

What I want to do is to close with this story in mind. I want to look at each of the three characters that Jesus interacts with and, as Mark does, invite us to see ourselves somewhere in there. In each of these stories, Jesus brings a sort of disruption. He disrupts the demons, he disrupts the townspeople, and he disrupts the demon-possessed man, who turns disciple of Jesus. And I wonder if, when we read a story like this, if we could think through, "Where is Jesus trying to disrupt in my life?"

Is there something in this story where I need to be disrupted, almost could I even say disturbed? The nature of this story is so strong and visceral and disruptive that it's a sort of holy disruption in which Jesus is meeting people where they are and often allows them to wrestle with their deepest longings.

So let's begin with Legion. As I mentioned, this is written as almost a sort of satire. It's really more of a political satire. The first clue we get of that is this word Legion, which, as I mentioned, the only meaning in Mark's day, would have been a Roman military guard. That's actually the first clue of a lot of military language that's happening in the text (Legion: 5,000 to 6,000 soldiers). The next is the word herd. This word herd as in the herd of pigs. That's actually not what you would call a group of pigs. A herd was a phrase used for a group of new military recruits. (Herd: a group of military recruits). So that would be a herd.

The next clue is when Jesus says he dismissed them or he gave them permission. That has the connotation of a commander dismissing his soldiers. (Dismissed: commander dismissing soldiers) And then the last one we see is when it talks about the pigs rushing down the mountainside, that's actually the word charged (Rushing: charge). Just like

you would think in a military sense. Jesus is provoking and alluding to something beneath the surface that's happening. Remember, for a Jewish audience, Rome was pure evil. They would roll into a town. They would obliterate anyone who refused to acquiesce to them. They crucified people publicly as a sign to say, "Listen, if you cross us, it will not end well for you."

And so what I find so fascinating about Jesus is he is able to identify that the problem is not the man; it's something happening beneath the surface. He identifies that there's something animating the evil that this man is perpetuating. The broken darkness is not the problem with the man.

Notice Jesus never berates the man. He never gets angry at him. He calls out the demons which are happening beneath the surface. You see, if we are not careful, we can conflate the animating evil beneath the surface with the person on top of the surface. And then we actually attacked the people we're trying to save.

It is a purely humanist worldview that says there's nothing beneath the surface going on. The only way to confront evil is to lash out at the person, not recognizing there's something happening beneath the surface. So I think it's a more complex, nuanced view that says we are not allowed to hate the other person because we recognize there's more nuance and complexity to the situation.

Reinhold Niebuhr, in 1932, wrote a book called *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, written between WWI and WWII. His whole thesis was that what you see in groups is more immoral than the morality of individuals. He says there's something about when you collectively gather together where there can be a sort of spirit of the group, which can turn things negative.

I think of, if you've read Orwell's *1984*, the Two Minutes Hate, remember they'd have to go into a theater and watch two minutes of propaganda. It would stir up the crowd, and you'd see this angry vitriol that would swell up, and they'd release this sort of hatred on people. There's something evil that animates it beneath the surface.

This is when Paul talks about the principalities and the powers. He says that our battle is not against flesh and blood, but it's against the rulers, the authorities, the principalities, and powers. He says that there's something that can get into the systems of the day that perpetuate evil, which isn't to dismiss personal responsibility and autonomy. Again it's complex and nuanced. Some of us willfully participate in these sorts of things. Others of us are consumed by them. But there's something that happens in a group.

I don't feel like I need to really make this case. Have you ever dropped into the comment sections on anything online? You see that vitriol. People act different in groups than they do individually. And there's something to these principalities and powers in which there is more going on, which is beginning to sway cultural motives that can get in there. And if we willfully step into those, if we give ourselves over to those things, they turn us into beasts, if you will, which is the image we get here. When we participate in those things, we dehumanize others.

We turn them into sort of beasts like this man living among the tombs. This Legion has something more going on beneath the surface.

Think about the systemic abuses we see all over the place. Systemic racism is a manifestation of that. I have no doubt about it. I think of the church scandals that continue to break my heart. The things happening in the Southern Baptist Convention the Catholic sex scandal and abuse. There's something happening beneath the surface. Again, it doesn't absolve people of responsibility, but let's not be so naive to think there isn't something more going on there. Some sort of heinous evil that's there beneath the surface.

Jesus is seeking. He's calling out those impure spirits. He is saying to the church to be careful because we are also the people, the community in which we love our enemies. And just like Jesus is entering into "enemy territory" in the Gentile region. He's confronting the impure man, but he does it in a way that he's bringing a disruption to bring wholeness and healing, not more division. He's coming to heal this man. He looks on him with love, and we as the church are not to locate the evil in people but to call out something that might be happening beneath the surface.

Then we seek, as Jesus does, to restore and bring about that healing. This will radically change the way we understand our role culturally. It's becoming all too easy for the church to just jump into cultural things and assume that we are right. And then we cause all sorts of damage and problems because we are locating the evil in the wrong place.

Jesus looks at the demon, and he says, "Come out impure spirit." The work of Jesus here is casting that out and then the beautiful image of the man sitting there dressed and in his right mind. Where he not only restores him, but Jesus says, "Now you must go and share the good news." It is a full embrace, a full welcome. Jesus is calling us to that sort of work.

The second category of people is the townspeople. You know, something that's often missed in this story is that when 2000 pigs rush down and are destroyed, the economic impact of that on that region would've been a dramatic loss. That's an economic meltdown for these people. When they came out and saw the man dressed in his right mind and they heard that 2000 pigs were lost, I think the townspeople were saying, "Jesus, you're messing with our life. You have to get out of here." Now what's interesting is the text isn't really clear on what causes the pigs to rush down the hillside.

The demons want to go into the pigs. Jesus doesn't tell them to go into the pigs. He just dismisses them. He says, sure. If you would like to do that. So you could ask if Jesus caused the pigs to go down the steep bank and drown? I don't think the text says that. I don't even necessarily think the demons wanted to be cast into the pigs to die. They were trying to avoid that. So I'm not sure the demons did. I think probably what happened, or at least what most scholars consider what happened, was that the pigs were overwhelmed by this Legion of demons, and they just simply couldn't handle it and rushed down and died. If that's the case, by the way, this makes the story very ironic.

Because notice that the man, the demon-possessed man at the beginning, who was out of his mind, ends up dressed in his right mind. And you see the townspeople who are considered the insiders, they see all this happen, and they then actually become a little bit out of their minds, and they're like, "Jesus, we don't want you. We want our money." There's a reversal of roles here. Think about when you encounter the power of Jesus as the disciples did on the sea. Yes, they were scared, but they moved closer to him. They said, "I want to be a part of this."

Think of the demon-possessed man. "You healed me. You restored me. That's power and authority. Jesus, let me come with you." But the townspeople, they rejected Jesus. I think they quite literally said, "We would rather have our money than you. You're disrupting our lives. You're asking us to give up things that we don't want to give."

It's the rich young ruler all over again. He comes before Jesus. Jesus, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus, "Follow the commands." Rich young ruler, "Yeah, I've done that." And Jesus looks at him and says, "Now give up everything you have." And the man leaves sad because he can't do that.

Are you like the townspeople? When Jesus requests that we lay down every aspect of our life, when he makes claim over your sexuality, when he makes claim over your economics, when he makes claim over the authority and influence you have, when he makes claim over every corner of your life, that's a demand we have to wrestle with. And the townspeople, it's too much for them. This is the role of discipleship. We learn how to bring all of those areas of who we are under submission to Jesus and say, "We lay this before you, Jesus. We want to be made whole."

Are you like the townspeople? Is there an area of your life that you won't let Jesus touch? I think the beautiful thing, as well as maybe the scary thing, is Jesus will not coerce you into the Kingdom of God. He will not force you. He will not override your will. If your will is bent against the way of Jesus, he will give you what you want, but Jesus will always welcome you. He will welcome you back with open arms saying, "What do you want? Would you like to come to me?" He's gracious.

He wants to disrupt us in those areas that are leading us away from the way of Jesus because he's offering us life. He's saying, "Listen, come step into the Kingdom of God. It's here; it's available. I'm not going to force you. I'm not going to demand you. I'm not going to coerce you into this thing." He just simply says, "If you want, it's here." So are you like the townspeople?

And then lastly, we get to the demon-possessed man. For some of us, we read a story like this, and we resonate with the demon-possessed man before the healing. And maybe, you haven't mapped on demon possession. And I'm not one to say that that's even what's happening with you, but you can sense the sort of darkness in the story.

And you think that your life is falling apart. Whether it's decisions you've made or whether it's circumstances that are bearing down on you, you recognize that you feel like you live among the tombs. Do you feel like you've been outcast by society? Do you feel like this man, alone and in pain? You're hurting and have messed up. Or life has messed you up. And you resonate with the man before the exorcism. I just want you to know that Jesus is here; he's coming to you. He crossed the lake to go find you. He's stepping into your territory. He's pursuing you, just like the disciples on the sea. Jesus is coming towards us.

Jesus would love to make you whole, and that may look like a lot of different things. It could look like Jesus leading you into therapy to wrestle with deep wounds from your family of origin or whatever it is, where Jesus wants to heal you from that. And he's equipped a therapist to step into that.

It may mean that you need to receive prayer for what you're wrestling with, for where you're at. It may look like stepping into a community group and being known and seen and saying, "I need to live in community because I'm isolated. And I can't do this thing by myself." Jesus is inviting you, and he wants to disrupt the ways in which you hold to isolation. He's inviting you into healing. Maybe you resonate with the man before the exorcism.

For some of you, that's not the space you're at, and you actually resonate with the man post exorcism. Many of us have had that story where Jesus restored us, and we're dressed and in our right minds. He's done that healing work in us. We're not perfect, but man, he's delivered us from an addiction or this or that. Jesus is saying to go to your own people, go to your classmates, your co-workers, whatever it is, go and begin to tell the story of what Jesus has done in your life.

Because that's the invitation, it's hard. I'd say it's a lot harder to do that than what I'm doing right now. It's a lot harder to go talk to your neighbor than it is to talk to a stranger about this. We get it that it's hard, but maybe that's what God's called us to. Let's go and tell the Good News because there are others who need that healing. There are others who need to receive that welcome of Jesus. So church, where are you? Where are you in this story? Where is the Holy Spirit provoking you to say you need a little disruption today?

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

© 2022 Central Peninsula Church, Foster City, CA
Catalog No. 1469-12FC