

When Jesus Comes to Town: *Mark 5:1-20*

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Dehumanization. “At the core of evil is the process of dehumanization by which certain other people or collectives of them, are depicted as less than human, as non comparable in humanity or personal dignity to those who do the labeling.” So says Philip Zimbardo¹, the famous psychologist. He’s the one who conducted the infamous Stanford Prison Experiment, wherein he took a group of his students, divided them into prisoners and prison guards, and watched how the students, now guards, dehumanized their fellow students, now prisoners, inflicting psychological torture upon them, and then how these prisoners, when told to by the guards, inflicted psychological torture on other prisoners.

Zimbardo calls it the “Lucifer Effect”, wherein a seemingly good person, through the process of dehumanizing another human being, can wish to or actually inflict evil on another human being. It’s how Hitler turned his country against Jews, through years of propaganda, cartoons and comic books, depicting Jews as sub-human. It’s the Hutus calling the Tutsis Cockroaches, which led to Rwandan Genocide and one million Tutsis dead. It’s white Southerners, most active church goers, gathering to take photos with the lynched bodies of black slaves, like they were a ten-point buck from a hunt.

A lot of the times it’s not so drastic, but it happens all the time. The internet allows us the distance we need to dehumanize the face-less person on the other side of the screen, as we argue and demean and insult and cuss out our supposed “friends” on Facebook, engaged in political debate. Label all Syrian Refugees as potential terrorists, then we don’t have to care about the horrible pain they have been through. Call your political opponents “unAmerican”, be they Republican or Democrat, and you don’t have to listen to them. Call a gay person or a transgendered person a “pervert,” and you can treat those precious souls as if they are the scum of the earth.

If they’re a degenerate, less-than, gross, dangerous, a terrorist, mentally ill, lazy, a pervert, incarcerated, unclean, unbeliever, God-forsaken--if they are not like us, then they are not as human as we are, and we can excuse ourselves for the harm that is done to them.

So, what of the man possessed with demons in our story? Is he human?

Three times we are told he lives among the tombs--among the dead people--not among the living. He roams like a wild animal, naked, howling night and day. He hits himself with stones to bruise himself. On his wrists and around his ankles are shackles, but the chains have been broken. Every time someone subdues him, he musters up monster strength and breaks the chains as if they were chains of paper. This *thing* is terrifying.

¹ <http://www.lucifereffect.com/dehumanization.htm>

When Jesus shows up, this man (if you can call him that) will not even look Jesus in the eye. Jesus asks him his name, but he doesn't even have a name anymore. All he knows is the name of his demons. The name that's been imposed upon him. "We are called Legion," the voice from within tells Jesus.

Legion, a name given to a battalion of 3,000-6,000 soldiers in the Roman Army, which suggests this man isn't simply possessed--he's occupied by a foreign army.

But is he human? Do we have to care what he's going through? What it might be like for him to lose every piece of dignity and humanity? Does he have a family? Does he have a name other than the name of his demons? Has he anything to say?

Or is he too far gone? So long as he's in the graveyard, we don't have to worry about him or care for him. We can pretend he's not even there. ... And then Jesus comes to town.

Jesus and his disciples are fresh off the boat, having barely survived a terrifying storm on the sea. What are the chances that Jesus and his disciples would land their boat right at this graveyard? Surely there were plenty of other places they could have docked their storm-tossed boat. Safer harbors where the disciples could get out and relax after their terrifying ordeal at sea.

No, they land in Gentile territory, at the Gerasene graveyard, home to a mad man. You've got to wonder if this chance meeting with the demon-possessed man is no accident at all. Perhaps this is where Jesus was headed all along.

When the demons see Jesus, they call to him and bow down: "What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God?" That's how it is in the gospel of Mark. The people closest to Jesus never quite see who Jesus really is. But the demons? They know it right away. They know what we too often forget: when Jesus comes to town, things change.

And change is the last thing this occupation of demons want. They're happy right where they are. But Jesus looks at the man, has compassion on him, and says to the demons inside of him, "Come out of this man."

And showing grace even to the demons, Jesus casts them out of the man and into a herd of swine, which results in, perhaps the most terrifying scene from the whole story and maybe the entire Bible. The whole hog farm becomes possessed by these demons, and the pigs go mad, and rush off a cliff into the water below, and to their death.

That is the power and horror of what was inside of this man. But now, it's gone. The howling has stopped. The stones once used to bruise his skin, have been laid down. He put on clothes, for the first time in a long time. And he sat down.

Jesus sat with him, and they began to have a conversation. Who knows how long it has been since someone just sat and had a conversation with this man?

While they were talking, the hog farmers rushed to town to tell everyone what has just happened, now that Jesus has come to town, and the town comes out to the cemetery to see it for themselves. When they get there, they see the one they used to fear, now clothed, sitting and “in his right mind,” talking with Jesus.

And you’d expect a party. You’d expect some hallelujahs. But no. Just like the disciples we saw last week, who became afraid *after* Jesus woke up and calmed the deadly storm, these people, after seeing the man now calmed, dressed, and in his right mind, became afraid. And they begged Jesus to leave their neighborhood.

Jesus comes to town. Heals the man they had cast out of their society. And they beg him to leave the neighborhood.

The story is terrifying, but even more so, it’s heartbreaking. The man, now restored to life, is still unwanted. Even in his right mind, he still terrifies, for the people cannot separate the man from all the demons that have been thrown upon him.

The man begs to go with Jesus, to become one of his disciples, but Jesus says, “No.” He needs to stay where he is. “Go home to your friends, and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and what mercy he has shown you.”

And that’s exactly what he does. He goes home, and throughout the Decapolis, which is a group of ten Gentile cities, and tells everyone, and I love this phrase, “how much Jesus has done for him.” And hearing his testimony, the people are no longer afraid, but they are all amazed at what Jesus has done for this man.

In a few chapters, Jesus will return to this Gentile region. And instead of people running him out of the neighborhood, crowds welcome him, because this man did his job. He told everyone what Jesus had done for him.

And maybe it’s a message we need to hear today, too. That the names we are called--and that we call ourselves--do not matter. The demons that torment us, do not define us.

Whatever it is that may be weighing on your soul. Whatever it is that makes you think you are less-than, cast out and God-forsaken--Jesus casts all these things out with his perfect love.

And that love--God’s love--is all you need. It’s what defines you. And it’s what sends us out on mission to our world, telling those who need to hear the testimony the most, how much Jesus has done for us.

May we, like this man, go out, spreading the good news, that when Jesus comes to town, lives are changed, and we are never the same again. Amen.