

Of Actual and Metaphorical Demons

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Acts 19:11-20 and Mark 5:1-20

Hallack asked me to speak about what I had been reflecting on or studying during what some are calling “The Hiatus”. I wasn’t sure the world was ready for my thought process, but here I am. I had been studying a story from Mark 5:1-20, titled (in some Bibles) “The Gerasene Demoniac”.

When I was younger, I remember this passage was used mostly to teach about Jesus destroying evil. Jesus “overcame” the evil spirit forcefully and dramatically. As I got older, I heard less about evil spirits and demons, and more about Jesus healing a schizophrenic. As I got even older, I was diagnosed with bipolar disorder, and the story took on a personal, more layered meaning.

Let’s listen to this passage together **Mark 5:1-20**

This passage says Jesus healed a man with an unclean spirit. As in, called the evil spirit out and allowed it to go into pigs. I’ll admit that I’m not entirely comfortable with the idea of evil spirits and their possession of human minds, but I’m not quite ready to say that the story is purely metaphorical either. It did, however get me thinking about what Jesus’ ministry and how it applies to mentally ill people.

We explore Bible passages through our own lenses, our own time, our own situations. For me that includes — but isn’t limited to — my mental disorder. I don’t live around pigs, and I have never encountered an evil spirit that I am aware of, so it’s a story about Jesus that I can learn from, a story that intrigues my mind. When I think more metaphorically, the story hits me at heart level. I think about how Jesus freed the man from his mental chains. I see more clearly

the God who finds his lost ones living in tombs and restores them. The exact details I hold onto lightly.

Note that I'm not saying the passage is wrong as is, or that we have to choose between "as is" and metaphorical; it's more that we can choose which direction to reflect on what it means, and the Bible speaks to us more powerfully. This passage struck me with the torment of this man, and it resonated with my bipolar experience. I may not have symptoms that would be the same as this man, and he might view the cause of his illness differently than I do mine, but we would have common ground in our understanding of what it feels like when our minds go somewhere without our permission!

The pandemic has been an especially difficult time for people who suffer from mental illness, including me. Many of the usual support networks used to help us deal with life in the world feel distant and virtual. Routine is disrupted, sleep is disrupted, stress increases, normal life events take on new importance, and suddenly, maintaining stability becomes a full-time job. And I'm talking about those people who function pretty well most days. We tend to think that a virtual consultation is as good as an in-person one; truly, I tell you that is not always true. Sitting face-to-face with another human being sometimes help us make it to the next day.

So why am I talking about mental illness in the pandemic and what does this have to do with Mark's story? I think it brought home ALL of our worst fears in one fell swoop: poor health, isolation, separation, mental deterioration, hunger, family tragedy, you name it. I think the beginning of the pandemic shelter-in-place gave people who don't have mental illness a tiny glimpse of what it feels like to live with one. Things are working and then they suddenly...aren't. Methods for coping with normal difficulties in everyday life aren't working. Thinking is difficult. We obsess over the stuff we *can't* do, but can't find the

energy for the things we can do. Things are falling apart too fast to keep up. Crying at the slightest thing. Laughing at inappropriate things. Getting angry at everything. And I got to thinking that, in this emotional maelstrom that we have been experiencing, we could *all* be the man running down from the tombs to Jesus, hoping we will be cured so we can get our life back.

Let's take a look at the story itself. Overall, Jesus is very understated in Mark's version of the story. He speaks few words, seems to move very little, and doesn't seem, well, very dramatic. The evil spirit, on the other hand, yells, questions, begs, insults. The man is literally a bystander (pun intended) in this until the end of the story. Jesus interacts with the spirit. We don't even know exactly when the man becomes free of the evil spirit. Even though this is the longest and most detailed version of this story in the gospel, the author of Mark definitely did not embellish much!

The story in Mark is one of three in the Synoptic gospels. Matthew and Luke also include this, but both of them devote considerably less time and detail than Mark. This is significant because, although Mark is generally considered to have been the first, most concise and shortest gospel written, this story has much more detail to it than Matthew or Luke. This passage is set in "the country of the Gerasenes", a mostly non-Jewish area — hence the pigs.

As we begin, Jesus is crossing the water in a boat with his disciples. They make it to the other side, and a man approaches Jesus as soon as he sets foot on land. The man comes from the tombs and is poorly clothed. Mark almost immediately tells us that he has an unclean spirit. He is prone to bouts of violent and self-harming behavior. People must have cared about him once, since they tried to help him as best they could by wrapping him in chains and putting him in shackles. Now, he is too strong for them. He is living among tombs, roaming the

area night and day, bruising himself with rocks, and howling. We hear little of the man, only the spirit.

By now, we have probably begun to think about symptoms of severe mental illness. The description of his behavior is uncanny. We also know that he has an unclean spirit, which might or might not be the same as an evil spirit. We don't even know if "spirit" means a separate entity or the man's own unclean soul.

The unclean spirit says, "What do you want with us, Jesus, son of the Most High God?" He asks in a manner both submissive and aggressive, bowing to and yelling at Jesus at the same time. Is the man submissive and the unclean spirit aggressive? The spirit appears to know Jesus by name as well as rank, and Jesus appears to recognize an unclean spirit. Perhaps the unclean spirit is trying to flatter Jesus with "Son of the Most High God", a non-Jewish term. Or, he could be mocking Jesus. Unfortunately we can't read tone of voice but given that Mark's narrative is so understated, I choose the least dramatic option! The term certainly isn't how Jesus identifies himself. He says, "Come out of the man." At least Matthew put an exclamation mark! The evil spirit begs that Jesus not torture him, even though it has been torturing the man, and shows a little cheek by invoking the name of God. Jesus doesn't respond to that, asking instead, "What is your name?" The unclean spirit says, "My name is Legion; we are many." Perhaps he's trying to look more threatening, but he uses a term for a Roman military battalion; Romans are currently occupying Jewish land. This may be a slap against Jesus. It doesn't work.

Sensing defeat, though, the unclean spirit requests not to be sent out of the country, but into a herd of 2,000 pigs instead. I wonder why he was so afraid or reluctant to leave the area? Jesus gives permission, the unclean spirit goes into the pigs, who run to the sea and drown. Imagine a herd of swine, tormented

by unclean spirits, grazing (do pigs graze?) peacefully, but suddenly charging down the hill and drowning. Imagine the reactions of the nearby swineherds, whose responsibility it is to protect and tend to the pigs!

The swineherds, who saw everything but probably don't understand it, immediately run around the area telling people what they saw. The people, unable to make sense of the swineherds story, decide to come see the man for themselves and meet Jesus. They see a previously violent, tortured man now seated at Jesus' feet, and not only clothed but in his right mind. Although they see him for themselves and talk to Jesus, the people are afraid of his power, afraid of this man who can dispatch an unclean spirit and destroy an entire herd of pigs at once. They ask him to leave. As he has dealt with others who were not ready to understand, Jesus agrees and starts to leave. The man he healed now appears and wants to go with him, but Jesus tells him to go back to his friends. He wants the man to tell his friends about what God has done for him. In other words, evangelize.

I wondered, why would Jesus not take the man along? It could be as simple as no room in the boat, or Jesus doesn't need another disciple right now. Still, I think Jesus recognizes that difference between healing and wholeness. He wants the man to reconnect among his friends and community, and he would also serve as a reminder of what God had given him. I guarantee you that every person in that community will know within a short time who the man is and how he'd been cured. Who better to demonstrate that than a man whose mind had been mired in chaos and was now freed in a remarkable way?

Mark's rendering of the story is factual, almost dispassionate, but it's a familiar story: The hero (Jesus) is calm and powerful; the villain (the evil spirit) seems to be weak, full of bluster, fearful. Humanity is on the sidelines as battle rages between powerful forces of good and evil. Good always wins.

A humorous side note: I read a thoughtful sermon on this passage online a while back. In the comments, however, a pig farmer responded that pigs could indeed swim and would not actually drown. That was countered by a mix of angry Christians saying that we couldn't rewrite the Bible, other angry Christians saying that it was *obviously* metaphorical, a second pig farmer agreeing with the first pig farmer, and several other pig farmers chiming in further with breeds of pig that could or could not swim, and bringing up the rear was an commenter who declared that, as Jesus killed 2000 pigs, a family's yearly income, he obviously was dangerous. As the sermon was about our need for community, I believe the preacher's message was lost! It does illustrate, however, that "real vs. metaphorical" division I was talking about earlier. Do we believe the events as written in Mark (or Matthew or Luke)? Do we believe the way these events are written is representative of something else? And if the latter, then what do they represent? Or can they both somehow be true, in a way we don't quite know yet?

I think we can agree that the man needed healing desperately, but there is more to healing than than driving out an evil spirit, as I mentioned earlier. Most of Jesus' healing as documented in the gospels is for physical ailments. The lame can walk, the dead are revived. This is where I started to look at this through the lens of mental illness. When I have had a very rough time, but am beginning to feel better, I feel disconnected, vulnerable. I have talked to enough fellow sufferers to know that I'm not alone. It is worse for those who have been institutionalized / confined. They are already healing from both spiritual, mental and physical isolation — and now the pandemic. This man might be free of his evil spirit or illness, but he's not whole yet. Some people have memories of what they did while they were affected. Perhaps previous friends have abandoned him (or he them). To be whole, this man needs to be reintegrated into society. Staying with his people would be important, to help him become whole and stay

out of unclean spirits or away from unhelpful thinking that might jeopardize him again. I know some of this is conjecture but it does point to the fact that God knows what wholeness looks like for each of us, and I think sometimes we stop too soon at physical and mental healing for mentally ill people. You got your meds, you had your stint in the psych ward, you're better. Mentally ill people need us to take another look, to do more than diagnose.

If the man is controlled by the evil spirit or mental illness, is he responsible for any of it? We have not taken a good look at our society's tendency to blame people for their own illness, even mental illness. Had a heart attack? Wouldn't have happened if you had eaten better. Depressed? Meditate and use essential oils. Such responses are harmful, not helpful. They put the blame on the person with the illness, accusing them of somehow not doing enough to solve their own problems. What about this story? What would you say if, in response to this raving man, Jesus said, "Your behavior is loud and threatening, so I'm going to put you in chains until you calm down." It is harmful to blame a person for their actions when we haven't properly acknowledged their presence and their illness, or addressed the underlying cause.

Our culture ignores and fears mentally ill people. Most people would prefer not to encounter us. Maybe it's because people fear losing their own faculties — and don't acknowledge it. Maybe it's because they know full well that, if it can happen to others, it could happen to them — and don't acknowledge that. Our jails in this country are overflowing with mentally ill people who were jailed for actions resulting from their mental disorders. Once they are jailed, we diagnose and medicate them. This passage also tells me that we need to be welcomed into our communities where mentally ill people can participate and have their gifts appreciated. What if you acknowledge their illness but still make places for them in community, rather than finding ways we won't fit and

setting us aside? How would it be if we never closed a community mental health clinic again during a budgetary crisis? (We may have to do this anyway after the pandemic if we are to meet the anticipated need for services and support.) What if we placed less emphasis on medication and more on community integration? A mentally ill person needs both community and purpose. And our communities could learn to see things from a different perspective and acknowledge their fears. I have blossomed with my community at Maplewood, and I wish that kind of acceptance and encouragement and sense of purpose for all who are mentally ill.

It could be that, as a result of the pandemic and its anticipated resulting boom of PTSD and depression, being treated for mental illness will not carry the stigma it does now. It would be good if we weren't judged as incompetent or weak. Jesus separated man from the unclean spirit: the person was given back his mind and soul, and the community was given back its member. Paul talks about the members of body, and how each member has a purpose that only it can fulfill. If this is true, we are missing out on a lot of skills and ideas that would enrich all of us. Like it or not, we are intertwined — the Spirit of God winds through and around all of us, giving us an opportunity for wholeness.

Notes

7/12/2020

1. Over time, interpretation of the Gerasene Demoniac passage has changed.
 - a. As is; Jesus destroys an evil spirit from a man and frees him;
 - b. Metaphorical: Jesus destroys sins that hold us back; there may or may not be actual evil spirits involved.
 - c. With diagnosis of bipolar disorder, this story became personal.
2. We don't have to choose a literal approach over metaphorical. We can hold the details lightly, explore both and see what holds up to scrutiny.
3. I'm not comfortable with demons and possession, or with purely metaphorical translation. Passage made me think about Jesus ministry and what it says to and about

mentally ill people. The torment that the man is experiencing in this passage speaks to my heart.

3. We explore Bible passages not only through their time and events, but through ours. This passage spoke to me loudly in the metaphorical interpretation.

4. Pandemic is difficult for everyone, but especially for mentally ill people.

a. Disruption of familiar routine makes maintaining stability full-time, even for fairly functional people.

b. Loss of services — need personal contact

c. Pandemic presents all of our worst fears in one. Gives us a glimpse of mental illness.

d. We seek healing. Jesus seeks wholeness

5. Passage is understated, little drama, and the man seems like a bystander. Mark tells the story in most detail of three Synoptic gospels (Mt, Mk, Lk). Mark's version is generally believed to be earliest.

6. At the beginning, the man is in physical and mental pain, isolated, unstable. It's hard to distinguish between the man and the unclean spirit. Who ran to Jesus? What has this man's life been like?

7. This sure sounds like schizophrenia, or at least, severe mental illness, but could it also be the behavior of a man under the influence of an unclean spirit? Does the meaning of the story change one way or the other?

8. Conversation in the passage is spare. The man/unclean spirit begin it, and there is the feeling of a chess match here. Jesus knows that this is an unclean spirit, but not its name. The unclean spirit knows Jesus but not his power. It flatters, baits, insults Jesus. Jesus has only two lines: "Come out of the man", and "What is your name"!

9. Jesus allows the unclean spirits to go into a herd of pigs. The loss of 2,000 pigs is going to register negatively with the owner. Side note: In the gospels, we hear a lot about Jesus "driving out" demons — but never about Jesus killing them. Even here, he send the spirits into the pigs and they drown themselves.

10. The swineherds see everything and go to tell everyone. People find their story hard to believe, but when they come to see Jesus and see the man, free of unclean spirit. Were the people afraid of the power Jesus had, or by his destroying the pigs, or by his healing the man?

11. The man asks to go with Jesus, but Jesus tells him to go back to his friends and tell them what God has done for the man and what mercy God has shown him. Why would Jesus not take the man along? I think Jesus wants him to reconnect with his people, his community. The man would not be whole otherwise. And once whole, he would be a reminder not just of God's power but of God's mercy.

12. The man clearly needs healing, but that isn't just a matter of getting rid of his literal or metaphorical demons. He needs to be with his community, to restore relationships, in addition to spreading his story. Jesus knows this, but today, we tend to view healing and wholeness as the same thing for mentally ill people. (They aren't.)

13. Who is responsible for the man's situation, he or his illness/evil spirit, or both? This matters because, in our society, we tend to blame victims for their own illnesses. But it is harmful to blame people for their actions when we haven't properly acknowledged their presence and their illness, or addressed the underlying cause.

14. We ignore and fear mentally ill people. For many reasons, they remind us of our vulnerability. If it could happen to them, it could happen to us. Do we fear losing our own faculties? Or, societally, are we uncomfortable with unusual behavior, even if non-threatening?

15. Our jails and prisons "house" many people who are mentally ill (at least 20%) and serving time for actions committed while unstable. A considerable majority of prison inmates suffered from childhood traumas (poverty, physical/emotional abuse, substance abuse) that can potentially lead to mental illness later. How do we as a country approach the concept of acceptance and forgiveness?

16. Mentally ill people need more than a diagnosis and medication. They need to be within our communities, to be part of life, to have their gifts and skills acknowledged and welcomed. This, in addition to our faith, is how we create wholeness. Do you think mentally ill people should be medicated, even if they state they don't want medication? What would that say about personhood? Do we think of them in terms of their personality, or gifts, or their illness?

17. Experts in mental health are anticipating an overwhelming need for worldwide mental health support for PTSD, depression, or grief as a result of the pandemic. Mental health support nation-wide is already overloaded.

18. Success in meeting this onslaught of need, in this country, will mean we need to join in communities around people who are suffering with mental illness. We need to pray that people can get the help they need earlier. We can work to ensure that laws regarding mentally ill people help them toward stability, rather than penalizing them. We can also be part of their support structure, their community. Above all, do no harm. A solution should not make the illness worse!

19. Jesus welcomed all who came to him. Children of God of sound mind also need to find wholeness, if they are to welcome children of God with different wiring in their brains. Jesus pointed to God as the source of our wholeness.