

## **Chaos/New Order: Speaking Truth to Power**

Shared by Rev. Ken Heintzelman

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Based on Mark 5:1-20

We are on a journey of the spirit. In this season leading up to Easter we are being extra mindful about this truth and we are using the Gospel of Mark as guide and springboard for our journey together as a congregation.

Mark has Jesus saying something very profound and revolutionary. The stories of Mark are framed by a short verse in the first chapter. It reads, "Turn around from the way you have been living and looking at life. Believe this very good news; the Kingdom, Presence, Way, and Intention of God is here and now. Not somewhere up there. Not somewhere out there. God's presence and intention is here and now in your hand to be grasped!" The stories of the faith testimony of Mark can be read and understood from this starting point.

I believe this is important because it speaks of a major shift in spirituality which we think is recent but I believe has been around for a long time. To get a handle on the idea that I want to share this morning let me quote John Cock who will be the leader for an up coming Revised RS1or Contemporary Theology Course coming up in May.

*"Secularism has been winning the day with its nonreligious one-world understanding of existence, which is absolutely true and absolutely false. It is true that this life is the life we have, between birth and death, the time of consciousness. It is absolutely not true that Spirit is otherworldly. The truth is that our lives between birth and death are the domain of the Spirit".*

There are modern and post-modern ways to say this and we should enrich our journey by study and discussion of such multiple Words About Life, but let me emphasize a particular notion. Our contemporary articulation of the Spirit's presence and on going activity in this world and in this life is an echo of several ancient wisdoms, and "the Kingdom of God is at hand" is one such affirmation.

It is no wonder that the good news of the Spirit's presence excited and inspired some and frightened and angered others. The message of the Spirit's presence challenged people to step up, take responsibility for their lives and participate in the work of the Spirit here and now. In participating in the incarnation of the Spirit the quality of life for all people improves. Who would resist such good news? "Who would resist such good news?" may seem like a rhetorical question but it is not. The message that Spirit is here and now and not far off, far up, or far away threatens the power structures of society that depend on an other worldly promise in order to maintain their order and power. Maintainers of the status quo use the remoteness of spirit in two ways. One way is to keep people focused on the next life rather than this one. It is like the magician who distracts you with one hand while doing something with the other hand. The second way is to dismiss people's challenges to power as being unrealistic and belonging to the next life but not this one. Illusion and scoffing are the first tools of those who are frightened of losing their power. This way of being in the world is what Paul Tillich would call demonic.

The story of the healing of the demoniac brings this message home. On the surface it is the story of a man who is isolated, mentally ill, or possessed living among the tombs. A man who is dead in every way except physically.

The modern mind is already challenged and it is at this point that preachers begin to equivocate. No one believes in demons or supernatural personifications of evil and so the possession is dismissed and a mental illness is put in its place. It is an irony that the story becomes possessed and hijacked by a modern foreign element. More about this later but for now let us go back to the journey story.

He doesn't even have his own name anymore. His name new name is thrust upon him. His new name is "Legion". There are many demons named "Legion". When we feel lonely, inadequate, and unappreciated we are not alone. The name of that demon is "Legion". When we look at starvation, the homeless and the poor; the name of that demon is "Legion". One of the things the name "Legion" should remind us is that we are not alone and suffering is universal.

The story goes on to tell us that Jesus heals the man possessed by a demon and the demon enters into a herd of pigs and the pigs run off a cliff and die drowning in the sea.

Allow me to be direct. The Gospel of Mark is a faith testimony in a metaphorical literary vehicle. Mark says, "I got something to say about the way my life has been changed and writing this piece of good news is how I am going to share it. It is not a history or factual chronological account of the ministry of Jesus. **Some** events may have happened the way they are conveyed. **Some** of the sayings may have actually come out of Jesus' teachings. **All** of the content is nuanced by the writer who has a faith agenda and this includes today's story. Let me demonstrate.

This story is an allegory and the point is that we are empowered to speak truth to destructive death dealing power. Paul Tillich, one of our RS1 theologians **defines the demonic as the intention and power that perverts and destroys life.**

For people living in Roman occupied Israel a legion was such a demonic power. A Legion is a military unit. In the time of Jesus it is the main projection of the conquering and occupying power of Rome. A legion is usually 5,000-6,000 soldiers but it could also refer to a smaller portion of a legion. In the area of this story there was a smaller formal unit of 2,068 soldiers. This unit marched under a banner with a picture of a boar.

Where did the demon "Legion" go when it was cast out? Into a herd of pigs.

How large was the herd? About 2,000.

What picture is on the marching banner? A boar.

How many soldiers occupying the area? About 2,000

Now, there is one more metaphor to unpack. The pigs destroyed themselves by running off a cliff and throwing themselves into the sea. The sea is a symbol for chaos. For a desert wandering people the sea is a frightening and mysterious place.

It is in the sea that the leviathan dwells.

It is in the sea of forgetfulness that God throws our sins.

The deepest part of the sea is the most removed place from the God of desert and mountains but even there we cannot escape God's presence.

It is the sea that Jesus commands to be quiet and be still in the story immediately preceding this one.

It is the sea of chaos that the pigs run to and die.

Are we getting the picture?

Most people think that the only way to order the world is by brute power and self interested politics. The Roman Empire and its law and order, its Roman Peace, was maintained by armies and torture. The possessed man who cannot be restrained is symbolic of this way of ordering the world. The result is an isolated life among the tombs. He dwells in death, he emerges from death, and believes death is the only way forward. **The demonic is the intention and power that perverts and destroys life.** Jesus speaks truth to this kind of power and it is overcome.

The way of spirit overcomes the way of domination, chaos, and death. God's Kingdom presence overcomes the presence of fear and the ethic of domination. The ordering of our lives in accordance to the already unfolding intention of Spirit trumps the ordering of our lives by systems of domination. This means we do not have to bomb people into submission. Building hospitals and schools is more consistent with the Spirit's Way. This means we should not compromise our values by torturing people bent on killing us and use their demonic intention to justify our demonic actions. Instead we cage the tiger and directly address the causes of such demonic possession. Please understand this is not an anti-military sermon. This is a message that confronts the narrow attitude that life can only be one way. This story from Mark confronts the tricky hands and scoffing voices that insist that the approach to our challenges is to meet demonic power with more demonic power. To limit our responses to demonic power and the worldview of domination reminds me of the saying, "When the only tool you have is a hammer every problem looks like a nail."

There are always more possibilities especially when we recognize that the Spirit is here and now in our midst. "Turn around from the way you have been living and looking at life. Believe this very good news; the Kingdom, Presence, Way, and Intention of God is here and now. Not somewhere up there. Not somewhere out there. God's presence and intention is here and now in your hand to be grasped!"

You can read this story as a healing of a possessed man. You can read this story as an allegory of speaking truth to demonic power and sending it back into the chaos from which it comes. Either way, it is a story that says life can and will be different because the Spirit is at work and we are a part of the healing of the world.