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Matthew 8:28-34

Some years ago, a young woman came to the office of the church where I was serving, asking if she could talk to the pastor about a personal issue. I had some open time and so I invited her in to my office. As she began to talk it was clear that she was pretty distressed, desperate and afraid – as she told me of the hard life she had growing up - and of the voice, influence, and activity of a demon she had allowed to come into her life – which was causing her to consider hurting herself and her young child. She feared for their lives and she said she wanted to be “delivered” from this demon. She had sought professional help and had talked to her own pastor, but none believed her story. And so I asked her a number of questions, and since I have had experience with this kind of thing before – I did believe her story. But before we could help her, I would need to pray together with elders of my church about whether God was calling us to do so. And so over the next few weeks, the elders and I prayed together – and, in spite of being Baptists – we all believed God was calling us to help her. And so a week later the elders and I and our wives and the young woman gathered together in the front of sanctuary, and we anointed her with oil and we laid our hands on her - and as other members in the church prayed, we prayed that God would cast the demon from this woman’s life. And after about an hour of earnestly wrestling together in prayer, the young woman was released from the demon as she rose up, cried out and fell to the floor. And her life dramatically changed after that. No more voices, no more influence, no more evil activity.

Now there are some who will question the validity of that experience as nothing other than mental illness, emotional distress or a personality disorder. I may have thought the same - had I not had the experience of confronting evil before. Some years before in another church, I had a direct encounter with a demon who possessed the husband of a woman who attended our church. When he came to church to talk to me about something else, I called him his name as a demon – and immediately his voice and his face and his body changed and looked into something that only could be called evil. As a pastor I have numerous times when I’ve had to confront satan, demons and evil. I’ve also lead prayer teams to engage the enemy of our souls in the Philippines, Brazil and Montreal. Brothers and sisters – satan, demons and evil are real. If we believe the Bible is true, then we would also believe there is a devil whose demons are at work trying to murder our souls. And so the question is always asked: “How come we don’t see it?” And the answer is: “Because we don’t want to believe it.” Some years ago, when God sent revival to our church – we also began to see witches and demons and evil activity all around us. You could argue that the devil had sent witches and demons and evil activity to distract us from the miraculous work of the Spirit that was happening in the hearts and lives of those in the church. To some degree, that’s probably true. But the reality is that when God is truly at work in our hearts and lives of followers of Jesus Christ - we are much more sensitive to the presence and activity in the unseen spiritual world around us – whether it be of God or that of satan. I believe we saw witches and demons and evil activity because they had always been there - and as the power of spirit of God was working in us and through us - we became sensitive and aware of the darkness of evil in the unseen spiritual realm that permeates the fallen world that we live in. We read of this in Ephesians 6:12 when the apostle Paul writes: *“We do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.”*

We see this truth in our text for today which is placed in the greater context of the gospel written by the apostle Matthew, who emphasized Jesus as Sovereign King, framed within the concept of the Kingdom of God, where Jesus rules and reigns in the hearts of those who surrender their hearts lives to Jesus as Lord and Savior. Today we also stand in the nearer context of the Sermon in the Mount, where Jesus spoke of what Kingdom character looks like in those who truly follow him, as well as how Kingdom conduct should flow out of those who possess Kingdom character. Over the past couple of weeks we have seen Jesus' divine authority as Sovereign King of the universe, as the power Jesus' words were made manifest through the power of his miraculous works - by performing *miracles of healing in the physical world of humanity* on those who were struggling with the pain and suffering of sickness and disease. And last week we saw Jesus' divine authority as Sovereign King of the universe in a *miracle of power over the natural world* by calming a violent, deadly, earthquake-like storm in the Sea of Galilee. Today we see Jesus' divine authority as Sovereign King of the universe in a *miracle of his power over the supernatural world of evil* by casting demons out of two men who were possessed of the darkness of evil.

*And when he came to the other side, to the country of the Gadarenes, two demon-possessed men met him, coming out of the tombs, so fierce that no one could pass that way. And behold, they cried out, "What have you to do with us, O Son of God? Have you come here to torment us before the time?"* Matthew 8:28-29

After the miraculous calming of the storm, Jesus and the disciples continue their trip across the Sea of Galilee. The event we are looking at today is focused entirely on Jesus; there is no mention of the disciples. Matthew does this to keep our attention focused on Jesus, in light of the disciples' question, "*What sort of man is this, that even winds and sea obey him?*" (Matthew 8:27). We read that they arrive on "*the other side, to the country of the Gadarenes.*" This would have been on the east side of Galilee which was predominantly populated by Gentiles, which explains why there would be pigs there, as Jews saw them as unclean animals. When Jesus arrives "*two demon-possessed men met him, coming out of the tombs.*" Mark (Mark 5:1–20) and Luke (Luke 8:26–39) both record this event also, but they speak of only one demon-possessed man. We can infer that Matthew has knowledge of the second man as Matthew often gives only general details of a narrative, so he simply mentions two men, whereas Mark and Luke single out one and describe him in more detail. They quote the man's name as "Legion" which would be the number of demons possessing the men. A Roman army "*legion*" had 6,000 men.

The eastern side of the Sea of Galilee is known as the Golan Heights which ultimately rises up to over 9,000 feet in height. Its terrain is full of limestone cliffs that are full of caves. The caves were often used as "*tombs*" to bury the dead. Out of these tombs came two "*fierce*" demon possessed men. The Greek word which is translated "*fierce*" in the English means "violently ruthless, savage." These men were so "*fierce*" that they were able to keep the whole community there at bay. One commentator writes: "Three things in this verse would have shocked the first-century Jewish reader. First, Jesus purposefully entered Gentile territory. Second, He went to a cemetery, thought to be unclean because of the dead bodies, and also thought to be inhabited by evil spirits. Third, he was met by two men possessed by demons. Just as first-century people treated natural forces with greater respect than we do, they also respected more highly the forces of the spirit world. The concept of going face-to-face with demons was frightful to first-century readers. These men were so dangerous, everyone avoided them."

Demons do exist, and demons are dangerous. God's Word tells us that demons are fallen angels who joined Satan in his rebellion against God - and are now evil spirits under Satan's control. Not only do demons exist, but they also can, to varying degrees, control our actions as individual people. The original Greek word here is not so much about being "*demon-possessed*" as it is about being "*demonized*." Demons cannot "*possess us*" in the sense of "*owning us*" but they can powerfully influence us, and to the degree they influence us, they can control us. In 1 Timothy 4:1-2 the apostle Paul warns us: "*Now the Spirit expressly says that in later times some will depart from the faith by devoting themselves to deceitful spirits and teachings of demons, through the insincerity of liars whose consciences are seared.*"

Demons are dangerous because they can also influence to cause both mental and physical illness. In Matthew 17:15-18 we read of a boy who was suicidal because of a demon. The men in our text for today are mentally deranged. In Matthew 12:22 we read of a man made both dumb and blind by a demon and in Luke 13:11-12 we see a woman who is physically deformed by a “*spirit*.” While not all disease and mental illness is caused by demonic activity, the Bible is clear in revealing that the nature some mental and physical problems is demonic. Demons are also dangerous in that they can manifest themselves supernaturally through humans. In Acts 16:16-18 Paul casts a “*spirit of divination*” out of a girl who was following him around. In Acts 19:11-16 we are told of a man who was so demonized that he overpowered seven men and left them bruised, battered, and naked. This reveals that demons are powerful. We see that in the event we are looking at today. While Matthew doesn’t record this, Mark and Luke write about one of these demonized men by describing how powerful the demon was within him. In Mark 5:3-4 we read that, “*no one could bind him anymore, not even with a chain, for he had often been bound with shackles and chains, but he wrenched the chains apart, and he broke the shackles in pieces. No one had the strength to subdue him.*” In this event we see also read that demon possessed people can be under the control of one or more demons. Demons are real. They are powerful and dangerous. Demons are the disruptors of the whole life of humanity – but they are no match for Jesus our Sovereign King.

*“And behold, they cried out, “What have you to do with us, O Son of God? Have you come here to torment us before the time?”* The demons immediately recognized Jesus’ true identity as the “*Son of God*” and speak out through the men they possessed. Their cry was a sudden, startling, powerful voice of fear and weak nerves - rather than the cry of men about to attack. The men with the strength to break free of chains and shackles that terrorized the whole region are suddenly subdued by the stranger who arrived in the neighborhood. Jesus was no more afraid of them than he had been of the storm - and the demons knew that. Their use of Jesus’ title as the “*Son of God*” overtly revealed their recognition that another stronghold of Satan, an evil stronghold within the sphere of the supernatural world, is being invaded and overpowered by the Sovereign King of the universe in the human form of Jesus, the “*Son of God.*”

Their recognition of Jesus as God and as God’s Son, also revealed their understanding of God’s purpose of life and His promise of a blessed eternal destiny - *did not include them*. James 2:19 says: “*You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder!*” The demons were not willing to come underneath nor yield their lives to Jesus as Sovereign King. In Mark 5:6 we read that they fell at Jesus’ feet in acknowledgment of His authority, *but not in worship*. It is clear that despite their correct understanding and belief in who Jesus was, they were not headed toward heaven - *because* they asked Jesus: “*Have you come here to torment us before the time?*” What was “*the time*” the demons were talking about? The “*time*” was the *appointed time* of the “*day of the Lord*” when satan and his demons would be judged by God and permanently removed from the world and from God’s people - and cast into the bottomless pit to painfully suffer eternal punishment forever and ever. The demons’ question reflected their fear that Jesus had come to prematurely to punish them. Their question also revealed that they knew Jesus had the power and authority to send them into the abyss - even before the appointed “*time.*”

*Now a herd of many pigs was feeding at some distance from them. And the demons begged him, saying, “If you cast us out, send us away into the herd of pigs.” And he said to them, “Go.” So they came out and went into the pigs, and behold, the whole herd rushed down the steep bank into the sea and drowned in the waters. Matthew 8:30-32*

At this point, the demons try to ask Jesus not to cast them into the abyss of punishment nor even send them anywhere else but, “*If you cast us out, send us away into the herd of pigs.*” This is not so much the question: “*if you DECIDE to cast us out*” because in Mark 5:8 we read that Jesus had already ordered them to be cast out. Here, they desperately “*begged*” Jesus about *WHERE* they were to go. And so this is not really a “*if you DECIDE to cast us out,*” but more of a “*SINCE YOU ARE GOING TO cast us out, can we go to the swine?*”

Neither Matthew, Mark or Luke indicate why the demons wanted to go into the herd of pigs, except they saw this as a better option than being cast into the punishment of the abyss. It is safe to assume that they knew Jesus would not grant them going into some other person, so possibly they thought Jesus would accept this option, since they were unclean and the swine were also considered unclean by Jewish law. We do know from both Mark and Luke that there were many demons and we also know from Mark there were about 2,000 pigs in that herd. These men had many demons in them, and now that they were about to be cast out of the men, they request Jesus to let them go into the swine. And Jesus said to them: “Go.” And we read that the demons, “*came out and went into the pigs, and behold, the whole herd rushed down the steep bank into the sea and drowned in the waters.*” Here we see the first deviled ham.

Note the power of Jesus authority here. With the one word: “Go!” thousands of demons obeyed his command. Satan, demons and evil are absolute powerlessness to contend against God. The unclean spirits here were keenly aware that the Sovereign King of All was present and without His permission they could do nothing. Satan, demons and evil cannot do anything to anyone without God’s consent. We must always remember that the devil, while his power may excel ours, is not a second god in the world and in no way does his power match that of sovereign omnipotent power God that we know through the crucified and risen Jesus Christ, as our Lord and Savior and Sovereign God. We need not fear any demons who serve as extensions of the devil’s power or influence *because* their power and influence is puny in comparison to the power and influence available to us through Jesus Christ. Jesus’ death on a cross for our sins in our place and his resultant glorious resurrection from the dead, are the means by which God defeated evil and death, so we might know the fullness of the life with God. But sadly, and way too often, we are fearfully reluctant to acknowledge and embrace that truth.

*The herdsmen fled, and going into the city they told everything, especially what had happened to the demon-possessed men. And behold, all the city came out to meet Jesus, and when they saw him, they begged him to leave their region. Matthew 8:33-34*

After thousands of pigs filled with demons plunged over a cliff and drowned, those who had been shepherding the pigs ran back into town and told everyone what happened, “*especially what had happened to the demon-possessed men.*” Mark and Luke both tell us that when the townspeople arrived and saw Jesus, and they also saw the former naked demoniac sitting down, clothed, and in his right mind. They also saw that the report about the swine was true and they realized what Jesus had done and Luke 8:37 tells us that, “*they were gripped with a great fear.*” Some speculate that they wanted Jesus to leave because they valued their swine more than the demon-possessed men. That could be true, but none of the texts say that. Instead, they emphasize that they were afraid because they saw the men who had been demoniacs, but now were normal, and they heard from the herdsman about the drowned pigs that had been infested with demons that Jesus had cast out of the men. The people from town were afraid of Jesus and the power of his authority. They did not want to him around anymore. One would think they would have rejoiced in seeing at victory over satanic demons. But as one commentator states, “all down the ages the world has been refusing Jesus because it prefers the pigs.” The people had seen enough to know that they wanted nothing more to do with Him. And so they asked Jesus to leave. Mark and Luke tell us Jesus complied, and they also tell us of what one of the once demon-possessed men did.

*The herdsmen fled and told it in the city and in the country. And people came to see what it was that had happened. And they came to Jesus and saw the demon-possessed man, the one who had had the legion, sitting there, clothed and in his right mind, and they were afraid. And those who had seen it described to them what had happened to the demon-possessed man and to the pigs. And they began to beg Jesus to depart from their region. As he was getting into the boat, the man who had been possessed with demons begged him that he might be with him. And he did not permit him but said to him, “Go home to your friends and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and how he has had mercy on you.” And he went away and began to proclaim in the Decapolis how much Jesus had done for him, and everyone marveled. Mark 5:14-20*

I first met Wayne while I was leading a Christian seminar for Prison Fellowship over a two-day period in the segregated unit for violent inmates in a maximum security prison in South Dakota. Wayne was serving a life term without parole for a violent murder. He looked dark and empty, mean and angry, and he wore a large medallion around his neck, a sign that he was a high priest in the Wiccan church of Satan. I found out later that Wayne had decided to attend the Christian seminar for the sole purpose of disrupting our meetings - but after I strongly but gracefully interrupted his disruptions, he was quiet as I lead the group through a day of worship, teaching and preaching and an evening of small group prayer together. The first few times I tried to talk with Wayne, he said little. He listened attentively when I preached and taught. He closed his eyes with I played guitar and led worship. He sat alone in a corner when we prayed. Wayne returned the next day; what happened next is written in his words:

“The next day I returned and spoke with Pastor Lee at length about who I was. He listened to me and showed understanding but he was brutally honest about what I needed to do: let go of my past and my relationship with Satan - and surrender my life to Jesus Christ. Pastor Lee came to the prison every month and always listened to me and prayed for me. After eight months he came for another two-day seminar. On the first evening he spoke again of God’s grace and forgiveness through Jesus. All that night in my cell my heart screamed out to God for help. The next morning I told Pastor Lee I was ready; he took me aside, prayed for me and prayed with me. I asked Jesus to forgive me of all of my sins, and on October 17, 1998 I received Jesus Christ as my Lord and Saviour. I was finally free of the darkness of evil! On that day God reached down, lifted me up, changed me and took hold of my life.”

When Wayne surrendered his heart and life to Jesus Christ, he was dramatically transformed from a disciple of the darkness for Satan to spread the evil of death - to a disciple of light for Jesus Christ to spread the gospel of eternal life with God. He became the epitome of 2 Corinthians 5:17: *“If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come”* in that his heart and his mind and his attitude and beliefs and intellect and soul were totally recreated. His physical appearance even changed in that those who saw him after that day did not even recognize who he was. We need not fear Satan, his demons or any evil because we’ve surrendered our hearts and lives to the one who said: *“All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age”* (Matthew 28:18-20).

Satan can do nothing in this world, and nothing in our lives, apart from the sovereign permission of God. While Satan does prowl around like a lion - he is a lion on a short leash. And God holds that leash. In the midst of a world full of pain and suffering and struggle and uncertainty - many who claim Christ live out their lives in fear and anxiety and worry. This tendency to fear is why we must remember and embrace the authority of our Lord Jesus. The truth is, there are times we even lack the faith of demons, who live in fear because of their belief. They know and believe who Jesus truly is, but they shutter in fear. But most often we are just the opposite: *we fear because of our unbelief*. If we had a faith just like demons, we would have no reason to fear because we have a personal relationship with the Sovereign King who rules with authority over all the universe. There will be a day when the authority of Jesus Christ will be fully and finally asserted; His kingdom will come and His will be done on a new earth as it is in heaven. In the meantime, we need not fear. The enemy of our souls has already been defeated! *“Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God so that at the proper time he may exalt you, casting all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you. Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. Resist him, firm in your faith, knowing that the same kinds of suffering are being experienced by your brotherhood throughout the world. And after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you. To him be the dominion forever and ever. Amen”* (1 Peter 5:6-11).

