

“Go and Tell”  
Mark 5:1-20  
The Third Sunday after Pentecost  
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If you are a frequent listener of National Public Radio, chances are you know about “driveway moments.” You know, those moments when you’re listening to the radio or a podcast and you’re invested in the story and you feel like you just *have* to sit in your car in the driveway until the segment ends. I grew up in an NPR household, and the most frequent driveway moments I experienced were during episodes of StoryCorps.

I hope you know about StoryCorps. They are an organization closely related to the Corporation for Public Broadcasting and NPR. They have worked with over 700,000 people in the last twenty years to record stories and archive them in the Library of Congress. You can go to [storycorps.org](http://storycorps.org) and look up stories that are conversations between loved ones, stories of civil rights activism, last conversations recorded before a loved one died, explorations of identity, immigration narratives, tender reflections on everything from parenting to mental health to being a first-generation college student to losing a home to coming out as LGBTQIA+ in rural areas.

Stories are powerful. Powerful enough to keep you lingering in the car, the engine off, the radio on. Or perhaps, as it is for me, powerful enough to pause in the stairway of your apartment building, headphones on, waiting for the conclusion of a tale about a stranger I’ve never met, moved to tears.

The Christian testament, and indeed the whole Bible, contain incredible stories: stories that resonate with us personally, stories that wow us, stories that scare us, stories that bring up anger and grief, stories that inspire us, stories that confuse us—stories that keep us coming back, again and again, wondering if we might pick up something new this time.

One of the most compelling stories is our scripture today, the Gerasene demoniac in Mark 5:1-20.

Perhaps you’ve heard this man’s story before.

Have you heard the story of that weird guy, that creepy guy, that strange guy, who lives on the edge of town and is always hanging out in the cemetery? Have you heard the story of the guy who no one likes, who is dirty, who makes people uncomfortable?

Or have you heard the story of the man who fell on hard times, who started having changes in his mental health, whose illness made him unwelcome in polite circles, who was run out of town by people who just didn’t know what to do with him?

Or have you heard the story of the son whose parents felt at a loss to help him, who turned away from those who cared about him and towards addiction?

Have you heard the story of the man who needed to face his demons? Have you heard the story of how he was set free?

Multiple stories can always be found, especially where on the surface there seems to be only one.

Stories were told about this man by the community who ostracized him. So much so that the author of the gospel told the story too, perhaps recording a visit from Jesus and embellishing a bit. Or perhaps they were just creating an opportunity in Jesus' narrative for Jesus to do a wondrous thing.

And as all good stories do, this story has multiple layers that offer deeper meanings, if you know where to look. It all starts with names.

It was common for stories in antiquity to involve humans encountering some other spiritual force that is outside of human understanding, sometimes called "angels" or "demons." The ancients were very perceptive, knowing that there exists something other than human minds can comprehend. And when demons were encountered, in the wild or possessing humans, the trick for getting the demon under control was asking its name. Once you have the power of knowing a name, you have power over the other-worldly being. Jewish New Testament professor Dr. Amy-Jill Levine suggests that potential interpretations by these not-so-chance names might have functioned as a "hidden text" within a miracle story, giving hope to those under the crush of Rome's power that its oppression would not last forever.

Dr. Levine writes,

"Jesus asks the man his name; the response "My name is Legion; for we are many" (5:9), is more than a simple identification. Calling oneself "legion" is like calling oneself the "101st Airborne" or the "Sixth Fleet." The demon is comparable to a Roman army unit of 6,000 men, which also means that the Roman army is comparable to demonic possession: it is violent, destructive, and without Jesus' power, unstoppable. That the demonic "legion" then enters into a herd of pigs would have made great symbolic sense to a Jewish audience, for whom pigs represent impurity. Pigs do not stampede, but that the legion drowns in the sea would have, symbolically, been good news to any people suffering under Roman rule. And that the location of the event, Gerasa, is a cognate to the Hebrew term *gerash*, which means "to expel" (it is the term used for Adam and Eve's eviction from Eden), makes the scene all the more apt: Gerasa can mean something like "Exorcismville." Readers knowing that the symbol of the army legion, the 10<sup>th</sup> Fretensis, responsible for Jerusalem's destruction in 70 C.E., was the wild boar might find a delightful irony in a story suggesting the expulsion of Rome's demonic power."

With the backdrop of a place that might as well be named "Exorcism-ville," a bunch of pig farmers, a cemetery at the edge of town and a man desperate to be healed, this story shows Jesus in line with many of his contemporary exorcists, confronted by powers beyond human comprehension. Some modern readers look to psychology in an effort to diagnose the man according to 21<sup>st</sup> century understandings of mental illness...but that's a different sermon, perhaps one we could craft together.

So, as we read this narrative that uses the language of the demonic, admittedly not defining it but for the moment resting in the mystery, we see the demons who make their home in the man's mind recognize Jesus' greatness. And, seemingly out of fear, the demons ask Jesus not to throw them out, not to mistreat them...perhaps as the community has done.

I imagine that the man internalized the stories the community told about him. I imagine he lost his identity as the possession of oppression set in. I imagine he felt like he was full of competing personalities and experience while trying to make sense of his ostracism.

Pastor and poet Meta Herrick Carlson writes about this passage,

“I do not hear one man skeptically checking, “What do you have to do with me?” No, I hear a Legion of our laments and fears and sorrows and the ache of deep and holy hope hungering: Have you come for me? Can you see and hear me? I beg you, Jesus, Son of the Most High God, to deal with me - all of me! - and the way I am a body broken, a mind tormented, a spirit crushed, a community divided from itself. Are you willing to deal with me?

Jesus confronts this pain and evil without compromise.”<sup>1</sup>

Not afraid to look the other-worldly in the face, not afraid of witnessing another's pain, not afraid of taking action to save the life of a stranger, Jesus casts out the Legion. He stops the man from internalizing the oppression that has kept him bound, and the Legion are thrown into the sea.

The pigherders are, understandably, upset about the loss of their property. But they also seem disturbed by what has happened to the man—the change in him is frightful to them, so much so that they beg Jesus to leave them.

So much for “thank you.”

Upon being liberated, the man experiences such gratitude and wants to go with Jesus, wants to become a disciple. He has experienced liberation and, as often is the case, he wants other people to be able to experience it, too. He is not trying to guard against others having the freedom that he has been granted--he wants it for everyone. In his bones, he seemed to intimately understand the powerful truth that no one is truly free until all are free.

But Jesus, who usually welcomes people to join in his mission, as long as they know the risks involved, denies the man a place in his traveling party. Jesus says no! He tells the man that he should go back to his people and his community and tell all who will listen about what God had done for him.

Why does Jesus do this? Why would he deny a follower?

Jesus wants the man to tell his own story. Because telling one's own story is an empowering part of liberation. In the words of Brene Brown: “You either walk inside your story and own it or you

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.metaherrickcarlson.com/blog/mark-51-20>

stand outside your story and hustle for your worthiness.” Jesus knew the man needed to return to those who had cast him out of their presence, restored to dignity, and be reconnected to his community.

It's empowering to be able to say what has happened to you and to tell it your way. Even to have others say, “that’s not how I experienced it, but I understand how you could experience it that way.” To tell your own truth can set you free...and can set others free.

In this story of the man often called a “demoniac,” possessed by something other-worldly from the realm of things-that-go-bump-in-the-night, we see a pattern for storytelling that we ourselves, as well as our communities, can utilize.

Jesus met the man where he was.

He witnessed the man’s circumstances—his living conditions, his behaviors, his wellness.

Jesus listened to the man’s petition.

Jesus cast away that which caused the man harm.

And then, “Go and tell,” Jesus told the man, because that is a transformative act.

He’s calling the man to preach. To proclaim what God has done in his life.

Prolific author Philip Pullman wrote, “After nourishment, shelter, and companionship, stories are the thing we need most in the world.” Perhaps as the man recovered himself after his encounter with Jesus’ ministry, he received nourishment, shelter and companionship—things that were hard to come by in his previous state of self-harm, ostracism, and death-dwelling. Perhaps his healing was secured as he told his story, as he claimed his own worthiness and lived into a fully-liberated version of himself.

Dear church, I wonder what healing could be gained by telling your story, your way? By setting the scene, providing the context, detailing the experience, expressing your meaning-making? When have you found belonging where before you thought there was none? When have you been given grace when you felt grace was far too rare? When have you embraced your identity because of the affirmation and celebration of those around you? What liberation could you access by sharing what the Holy has done in your life?

It would be a profound gift to follow Jesus’ example of meeting, witnessing, and listening to your story... and then reminding you of how the Holy calls you to proclaim your story. And when we are gifted a story, let us treat it as such—someone else’s experience and perspective are gifts, tenderly and vulnerably offered to us. Let the individual stories in the news, on social media, in books, grow our empathy and call us into being transformative presence with one another.

Beloveds, Seattle First Baptist Church has a story to tell. We have stories to tell. Some of it can be learned by reading our historical narratives, some of it can be received in sharing over Place at the Table dinners, some of it can be explored in our communal worship and education and play.

Our story has offered freedom to many throughout the past 155 years—how many more might we reach if we put our heads and hearts together?

So tell your story. And pull up a chair or linger in the driveway so you can listen to someone else's life. Our stories have the capacity to change each other, and through our relationships, to change the world that is our common home.

Go and tell. Listen well. Our stories—our lives—our love—can liberate.

May it be so. Amen.