



The Healing of the Demon-possessed Man, Julia Stankova

The Exorcism in Gerasa

SCRIPTURE

Luke 8:26–39

MAIN IDEA

Jesus' presence and human vulnerability can result in a personal and communal transformation.

OPENING PRAYER

Grant me grace, O merciful God, to desire ardently all that is pleasing to you, to examine it prudently, to acknowledge it truthfully, and to accomplish it perfectly, for the praise and glory of your name. Amen.

Thomas Aquinas, 1225–1274

INTRODUCTION

The 1973 movie *The Exorcist* led to an increased fascination, by Christians and non-Christians, with demon possession. Based on the book of the same name by William Peter Blatty (1971), the story opened the conversation about a phenomenon with deep roots in the ancient world. When a young girl began levitating and speaking in tongues her mother enlisted the help of a priest who performed an exorcism to rid her of her

demons. If you've seen the movie, it's hard to forget the scene when Regan's head rotated 360 degrees. The movie had a significant impact on American culture and the horror movie genre.

That humans could be possessed by demons was an almost universal belief of people in the ancient Mediterranean world. The Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) are full of stories and references to demon possession and exorcism. In fact, more than sixty such stories are found in these Gospels. In Acts, the apostles had the ability to cast out demons through the work of the Holy Spirit (Acts 16:16–18). Mention of demons in the Epistles and the Book of Revelation is sporadic and anything we read bears distinction from the stories in the Synoptic Gospels. Interestingly, the Gospel of John has no accounts of demon possession or exorcisms.

The story of the Gerasene demoniac is the most graphic depiction of an exorcism found in the Synoptic Gospels (Mt 8:28–34, Mk 5:1–20, Lk 8:26–39). According to Luke, after Jesus calmed the storm on the Sea of Galilee, Jesus and the disciples traveled east to the region of the Gerasenes. In Matthew's telling of the story, Jesus traveled to the region of Gadarenes. The name of the location varies across the Synoptics. It is referred to as Gadara, Gergesa, or Gerasa. Both

Luke 8:26–39

²⁶ Then they arrived at the country of the Gerasenes, which is opposite Galilee.

²⁷ As he stepped out on land, a man of the city who had demons met him. For a long time he had worn no clothes, and he did not live in a house but in the tombs. ²⁸ When he saw Jesus, he fell down before him and shouted at the top of his voice, "What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I beg you, do not torment me"—

²⁹ for Jesus had commanded the unclean spirit to come out of the man. (For many times it had seized him; he was kept under guard and bound with chains and shackles, but he would break the bonds and be driven by the demon into

the wilds.) ³⁰ Jesus then asked him, "What is your name?" He said, "Legion"; for many demons had entered him.

³¹ They begged him not to order them to go back into the abyss. ³² Now there on the hillside a large herd of swine was feeding; and the demons begged Jesus to let them enter these. So he gave them permission. ³³ Then the demons came out of the man and entered the swine, and the herd rushed down the steep bank into the lake and was drowned. ³⁴ When the swineherds saw what had happened, they ran off and told it in the city and in the country. ³⁵ Then people came out to see what had happened, and when they came to Jesus, they found the man

from whom the demons had gone sitting at the feet of Jesus, clothed and in his right mind. And they were afraid.

³⁶ Those who had seen it told them how the one who had been possessed by demons had been healed. ³⁷ Then all the people of the surrounding country of the Gerasenes asked Jesus to leave them; for they were seized with great fear. So he got into the boat and returned. ³⁸ The man from whom the demons had gone begged that he might be with him; but Jesus sent him away, saying, ³⁹ "Return to your home, and declare how much God has done for you." So he went away, proclaiming throughout the city how much Jesus had done for him.

Gerasa and Gadara were cities located east of the Sea of Galilee and the River Jordan. It is probable that the handing down of New Testament manuscripts over many years gave way to slightly different readings of the same word. We can conclude that "Gergesenes" and "Gerasenes" are variations of the word "Gadarenes." Even the story itself is slightly different from one Synoptic to another. For instance, Matthew recalls two demoniacs coming out of the tomb to meet Jesus (Mt 8:28), while Mark and Luke recall just one (Mk 5:1–2, Lk 8:26–27). It is interesting to note linguistic and textual variations. However, the central focus of this story is the realization that Christ was the only one who could liberate the demoniac from his suffering.

Contemplate

What stories about demon possession do you remember hearing as a child or teenager?

How do these stories compare to what you think about demon possession today?

In your estimation, are demons and demon possession discussed too little, too much, or just enough in our faith tradition?

EXAMINE THE CHARACTERS

Jesus is the first person mentioned in the story and although the disciples were with him, Luke does not include his companions. Jesus arrived on land and as he stepped out of the boat, the suffering man approached and addressed him, “Son of the Most High God” (Lk 8:28). Luke has used this title before when Gabriel said to Mary at the Annunciation that her child will be called “Son of the Most High God” (Lk 1:32). This title is pivotal to Luke’s understanding of the person and work of Jesus Christ, in that God actively intervenes in the world. The Son of the Most High God is the protagonist in the story, and in this brief encounter with the demoniac, Jesus restored a life.

The demoniac was a victim subjected to nakedness, isolation, and fear. No medicine or hospital could offer him relief from his suffering. The demoniac referred to himself as *legion*, a term used at that time by the Roman army for a unit that contained five to six thousand soldiers. The implication is that numerous demons possessed him. The legion of demons is the antagonist that the protagonist, Jesus, destroys. Luke refers to the group of people who gathered around the healed man as the people of the surrounding country of the Gerasenes (Lk 8:37). The residents of this region were gentile pig farmers who may not have known Jesus and were unable to understand the full scope of what had taken place. They could only see the negative financial impact the event had for their families and community. It is no surprise that they became afraid and asked Jesus to leave.

SACRED ENCOUNTER

Luke records that Jesus and his disciples sailed to a gentile region east of Galilee, including these non-Jewish people in Jesus’ earthly ministry. Since this region was unknown territory, it might be safe to assume that Jesus did not know what to expect when he got off the boat. Jesus’ encounter with the demoniac happened right away. The man had been living among the cold and isolated tombs day and night, and the townspeople had

Contemplate

When have you allowed fear to distract you from seeing the power of God in your life? How were you able to overcome that fear?

When did fear keep you from befriending someone? How did that turn out?

bound his hands and feet so that he could not hurt himself or others. Undeterred by his nakedness, the man fell before Jesus and pleaded, “Do not torment me” (Lk 8:28). Through Jesus’ actions, the legion of demons left the man, entered a herd of swine, and drowned in the lake. No longer possessed, the man came out of the cave clothed, sat at the feet of Jesus, and begged to stay with him. But Jesus instructed him to return to his home and tell everyone how much God had done for him. He obeyed.

In line with Greek and Jewish traditions, the people of the New Testament believed demons to be the cause of most physical and mental problems. These problems included epilepsy (Lk 9:38–42), loss of speech (Lk 11:14, Mt 9:32–34), the inability to straighten one’s back (Lk 13:10–13), the inability to hear (Mk 9:25), the inability to see (Mt 12:22), and a tendency towards self-destruction (Mt 17:15–18). Although the predominant view in Jesus’ time was that demon possession and mental disorders were connected, in our time and place we do not equate the two. While we would debate with Luke the cause of the demoniac’s ailment, the intense suffering the man endured is no question. The moment the man walked toward Jesus was dramatic. It was daylight and he was completely naked; he was probably disheveled, dirty, and utterly desperate. He sought healing. Whether we believe it was the man who spoke to Jesus or the demons who had possession of him, he went to Jesus in a state of extreme vulnerability. He took a

huge risk to appear in the community, but he did it anyway, and sought an end to his suffering.

TRANSFORMATIVE EXPERIENCE

Author Brené Brown writes, speaks, and teaches about vulnerability; her work has deeply transformed my own life and ministry. Brown defines vulnerability as uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure. She clarifies that vulnerability is not weakness; to be vulnerable is to be courageous.⁵ By becoming vulnerable to Jesus, the demoniac in Luke's story is transformed from a suffering, naked, unstable person without a home to a person with a restored mind and soul. Once the most untouchable of the untouchables, the least acceptable turns out to be the most accepting of what Christ has to offer and becomes a messenger of liberation to others. God's power and human vulnerability bring about more than just a personal healing, but a communal transformation. Luke presents the man as the first gentile apostle, returning to his home and family with new purpose as a bearer of good news throughout his community.

The demoniac stepped out from the shadows. He could have stayed among the darkness of the tombs and succumbed to his ailment, but he envisioned a life beyond. Luke does not reference the man's faith at any point, but he somehow recognized Jesus and went to him. In this story, vulnerability was a life-changer and harnessing the power of vulnerability allowed the man to hope for what he could not see—that Christ was the only one who could liberate him from his suffering.

Through this story we see that God accepts us for who we are, not who we pretend to be or who we hope to be. Knowing that, are we willing to

embrace our vulnerability? Luke showed how the demoniac accepted his predicament and bore it all in the presence of Christ. We, too, can become our true and whole selves with each practice of vulnerability. Are we willing to accept who we are and bear it all in the presence of Christ?

Contemplate

In recent years our society's approach to mental illness has become more compassionate than the approach of the demoniac's community. How has a more modern sense of awareness, understanding, and care helped you or your family or friends? In what ways have you seen your church show compassion to people with mental health issues? How does your faith inform how you encounter others in need?

CLOSING PRAYER

Thanks be to thee, my Lord Jesus Christ, for all the benefits thou hast given me, for all the pains and insults thou hast borne for me. O most merciful redeemer, friend and [sibling], may I know thee more clearly, love thee more dearly, and follow thee more nearly, day by day. Amen.

Richard of Chichester, 1197–1253

⁵ Brené Brown, *Daring Greatly: How the Courage to Be Vulnerable Transforms the Way We Live, Love, Parent, and Lead* (New York: Penguin Random House, 2012).

The Exorcism in Gerasa

Overview: The second encounter reveals to us the ways in which Jesus is present with people who live without the support of their communities due to rejection, confusion, and fear. Despite our society's tendency to isolate people who are struggling, lesson two challenges us to trust that no illness—physical, spiritual, or mental—has the power to exclude anyone from the saving grace of Jesus.

Materials: Mirrors; images from television, movies, or books of people possessed by demons or stereotypical portrayals of mental illness; participant's notebooks for intercessory prayers.

Prayer

Invite members of the group to take a few minutes to look at themselves in a mirror.

Online option: they can turn on their cameras and observe their images.

Lead them through three deep breaths saying each time: "Your face can be the visible image of Jesus to others."

Lead the group in the opening prayer in the study book.

Perform Luke 8:26–39

Assign participants to read the text divided into parts for the narrator (Luke), the possessed-then-healed man, and Jesus. They may wear costumes and do a dramatic presentation or read together as a group. The person playing the man released from demons may wear a mask or face covering as a sign of depersonalization, dehumanization, and exclusion. Jesus could remove the mask as a sign of healing.

Online option: Search for and share a short video of a performance based on the text.

Introduce the Lesson

Use the Introduction on page 21 to present this lesson to the group.

Show images of people portrayed as possessed by demons or with severe mental illness (as mentioned in the lesson).

Ask: How do these representations reinforce social biases? How do our perceptions of those with mental illness influence how we treat them?

Contemplate

Discuss the *Contemplate* questions on page 22 with the group.

Examine the Characters

Although we cannot understand a demonic possession or distinguish it from neurological or psychological conditions, we can empathize with the pain of people who feel they are not in control of their minds. Even when an affliction escapes our understanding, nothing can separate us from the love of God and the power of the Holy Spirit. In this story, Jesus recognizes the image and likeness of God in the demon-possessed man. By responding with dignity, respect, and compassion, Jesus serves as an example of how to listen and attend to the needs of others.

Sacred Encounter

Direct the group to a minute of silence.

Looking again in the mirror or the video, search for things like wrinkles, beauty marks, facial expressions, and scars. We have the signs of happiness in our cheeks and the evidence of worries in our foreheads. But God can see what

is invisible in the mirror, the most vulnerable marks of our stories. Even without knowing, we are not alone in our sufferings.

Contemplate

Discuss the *Contemplate* questions on pages 23 and 24 with the group.

Transformative Experience

Ask everyone to write in their notebooks of intercessory prayers a list of people from their families, friends, and church they can trust and with whom they can be open.

What is it about the people on this list that makes them people you can trust? What is it about a group of people that makes being with them a space where it is safe to be vulnerable?

How can the groups we're part of be safe spaces for growth, discernment, and healing? How do women's groups, Bible study groups, and prayer circles with trusted friends connect us to Jesus and each other? How can we share love, support, and openness with those outside our groups?

Closing Prayer

Look into your mirrors and read the closing prayer together.

Until the Next Lesson

Invite the group to use their intercessory notebooks to pray in gratitude for those they trust and pray for guidance to be a person others trust.

Direct them to add people who struggle with chronic illness to their prayer list. Pray also for people who struggle with paying bills for their medical care.