I talked to my friend John earlier this week, and as usual we discussed our upcoming sermons. When I told him that I was preaching this passage, he reminded me of our New Testament professor in college, L.C. Waddle, and the things he said about this text. Dr. Waddle said this was the first time anyone ever served deviled ham. And it was the first recorded case of swine flu. “You’ve got to tell these jokes,” John said. I said, “I can’t do that. Those jokes are hogwash.” That’s what you must do with texts like this, described by scholars as “eerie,” and “bizarre,” put some distance between the hard truth of the story and our own lives. Tell a little joke.

Night time is when the demons are most active. You ever notice that? You lie down, switch off the reading lamp, and just when you’re about to fall asleep, one of them emerges from the end of the bed. He doesn’t have horns or a gruesome face; no, he looks quite familiar. He’s the one that makes you feel insecure and worthless, like you can never do anything right. You begin going through your day, noting all the things you did wrong, recounting all the conversations where you wonder if you said the right thing.

Well, this is not working, you think. So, you pick up your phone and open Facebook, or Twitter, or Instagram. And you can see there, in the familiar glow, all your friends, with their smiling faces and successful children at some beach or mountain retreat or amusement park. They don’t look like they have any insecurities or sense of worthlessness. They are sunny, funny, put together people, these social media friends.

This is not working either, so you swipe a couple of places over on your phone and find your friend. You know he’s up. You text him. “How’s it going?” “Great.” “Hey, you hear anything about Charlie lately?”

And so, it begins. Charlie is your mutual friend who has fallen on hard times. He’s done a bit of time in jail, slipped off into drug use, and rumors are running rampant the
fact that his wife may be filing divorce papers. You and your friend spend at least an hour texting about Charlie, because, after all, you’re so deeply concerned. You notice the more you focus on Charlie and his massive problems, you are beginning to get sleepy, the demon that was crouched at the foot of your bed has slunk away, and you put your phone down, and fall fast asleep.

We all have a Charlie or two in our lives, that person who, when you begin to wrestle with your own demons, you can always turn to and say, “Well, I may have a few issues, but look at that guy.”

“That guy” is the one who meets Jesus on the shore of the Sea of Galilee. Luke calls it “the other side” and it is, in every way. This is where the others lived, the Gentile pig-farmers. You cannot get more opposite of Jewish sensibilities than in this place. As soon as Jesus’ feet hit dry ground, he is confronted by the one everyone talks about when things seem bad. “At least it’s not as bad as that guy.”

He wears no clothing, making his home among the tombs, the caves that dot the mountains ringing the sea. He is overcome by forces beyond his control. He is so out of control that they tried to keep him under guard and bound with chains and shackles. But nothing can hold him. He breaks the bonds and is driven into the wilds. In Mark’s account of this story, he says the man would spend his days at the tombs howling and bruising himself with stones.

This is the way things are, until Jesus arrives on the shore. It is clear from the beginning that the demons tormenting this man are no match for Jesus. Luke has been preparing us for the encounter, describing the demon-possessed man in a kind of superhuman way – deranged and roving and unable to be contained, or guarded, or controlled. But Jesus is calm. The frenzied demons fall at his feet. He asks for names. “Legion,” comes the response, ominous and foreboding. But, already they know themselves defeated at the hands of this calm, determined healer. They just want to set the terms of their defeat. They do not want to go back to the “tehom,” the abyss. “Send us into the pigs instead.” He calmly does, and the pigs charge straight into…the abyss.

Problem solved, right? The townspeople, who have been alerted to the goings-on by the pig farmers who now have an inventory problem, rush out to the scene to find something they surely did not think they would ever see: the man, clothed and in his right mind, sitting at the feet of Jesus.
The response from the people is not amazement, or awe, or belief…only fear. “And they were afraid.”

When the raving man on the mountain gets healthy, everything changes. Now, issues that were hidden come to light. Now, the things we didn’t have to look at in ourselves because we were so busy looking at the wild man on the mountainside come to the fore. Now the one who was always the problem, “that guy,” is given a new vocation – “Go to your people, your fear-filled people, and declare to them what God has done for you.”

This one who lived among the dead is now alive. This one they tried to guard and restrain is now remarkably free. This one who was wrestling with demons is now able to declare not what the demons are doing, but what Jesus has done for him. There is no one in that town who is as close to God, no one who has better insight, than this one.

It will be a big job for him, because, as James Martin writes, “We, too, contain a legion. We’d rather not think about it, so we avoid the people on those mountainsides.”

David Brooks recently wrote about the new Fred Rogers documentary, relaying a story first told in a profile piece in Esquire Magazine. “Once, Rogers met a fourteen-year-old boy whose cerebral palsy left him sometimes unable to walk or talk. Rogers asked the boy to pray for him.

“The boy was thunderstruck. He had been the object of prayers many times, but nobody had asked him to pray for another. He said he would try since Mister Rogers must be close to God and if Mister Rogers liked him he must be okay.

“The interviewer complimented Rogers on cleverly boosting the boy’s self-esteem, but Rogers didn’t look at the situation that way at all: “Oh, heavens no Tom! I didn’t ask him for his prayers for him; I asked for me. I asked him because anyone who has gone through challenges like that must be very close to God. I asked him because I wanted his intercession.”

Brooks writes, “And here is the radicalism that infused that show: that the child is closer to God than the adult; that the sick are closer than the healthy; that the poor are closer than the rich and the marginalized closer than the celebrated.”

to turn to, who better to ask for prayers in battling your own demons, than one who
knows firsthand the battle, and has the joy, and humility that comes from intimacy with
God in the dark night.

We might be tempted to distance ourselves from this text and the self-examination
it asks. We might be tempted to ask Jesus to leave town. Please don’t. Let us linger with
him in this place, let us listen to him, and to the one for whom he has done so much, and
then rise up in joy to follow. Amen.