The story read earlier is rather bizarre. There’s a crazy man no one can control, demons who talk out loud and a herd of pigs that drown in the sea. This may explain why you haven’t heard many sermons on this passage.

In 34 years of ministry in this church, I have never conducted an exorcism. I’m not sure what I would do if I were called upon to cast demons out of people.

There is a tendency in our sophisticated society to dismiss such stories as long ago and far away. The easy way out of dealing with demonic possession is simply to write it off.

The devil has become something of a quaint figure in our day, dressed as he is in a red jump suit with pitchfork and tail. He serves as a convenient mascot for college teams. The Duke Blue Devils, Arizona Sun Devils and Mississippi Valley State Delta Devils come to mind. While we’re on the subject of mascots, perhaps some of you Wake Forest alumni can explain a Demon Deacon?

What are we to make of this passage? Some people contend that demonic possession is an archaic way of explaining mental illness. Since ancient people had no categories for dealing with psychological disorders, their default position was to attribute it to the devil and demons. While mental illness is one component of this story, there are also diabolical forces at work here.

Whenever people want to minimize the past, I recoil. Christian author C.S. Lewis was a confirmed atheist in his early life. He dismissed religion as being old fashioned and out of date. But his literary friend, Owen Barfield, called Lewis on his bias against old things. Barfield called it “chronological snobbery,” which equates to a decided preference for anything new.

After Lewis became a believer, he penned a whimsical, yet altogether serious treatment of the devil in his book *Screwtape Letters*. He wrote in his introduction, “There are two equal and opposite errors into which we can follow about the devils. One is to disbelieve in their existence. The other is to believe, and to feel an excessive and unhealthy interest in them.”

We cannot simply dismiss this story. It must be taken seriously. Evil exerts considerable influence over people. At
The…demons go on high alert when Jesus…enter[s] town.

times, evil appears to take possession of people.

Demon possession was exceedingly rare in the Old Testament. Apart from King Saul’s torment by evil spirits (1 Samuel 16:14), there is little mention of it. In the New Testament, Jesus’ encounters with demonic powers intensify. While Jesus ushers in the kingdom of God, the forces opposed to his reign also step up their resistance. The devil and his demons go on high alert when Jesus and his little band of followers enter town.

No decent Jew would ever think of setting foot in the Gentile region of the Gerasenes. Everything about the place is considered unclean. The Gentiles are unclean, the pigs are unclean, and the man in our story is unclean also. This crazy man lives on the outskirts of town in an abandoned cemetery, ostracized from the rest of society. Luke tells us plainly at the outset of the story that this man is possessed with demons (8:27).

This wild man rushes up to Jesus, not seeking to be cured but in order to protect himself. “What do you want to do with me, Jesus, the Son of the Most High God? I beg you, do not torment me” (8:28).

Jesus asks the demons, “What is your name?” Naming the man’s tormentors will prove an essential first step in finding a cure.

“My name is Legion, for we are many,” the demons reply.

A Roman legion in those days would equate to 6000 soldiers. It’s the equivalent of saying that the man is inhabited by a virtual army of evil spirits.

The demons immediately recognize Jesus. Somehow, they know they have met their match, so they attempt to negotiate a truce. They ask not to be cast into abyss, the place of the dead. That would spell their annihilation. They request rather to be sent into a nearby herd of pigs.

Surprisingly, Jesus concedes to their request. They take possession of a herd of swine, promptly rush headlong over a cliff and drown in the sea.

I cringe at this point in the story. What’s up with these drowned pigs? This act of animal cruelty seems so out of character for Jesus. But perhaps Jesus acquiesces to these demons to expose their diabolical intent. These demons are bent on destroying everything to get what they want.

The hired hands run into town to report the loss. Naturally, the pig owners are upset about losing their investment. Yet, I’d also expect these townspeople to be relieved. The crazy man who lives on the edge of town is now tamed. No one has to cringe in fear anymore. Their reaction is anything but gratitude. They ask Jesus to leave, so he gets in a boat and departs. The man possessed by demons requests to join Jesus’ disciples. Instead, Jesus directs him to...
Whenever we are alone, we are vulnerable.

...fear is the antonym of faith.
summon us to share the good news of Christ’s redemption with our friends and family. Our primary mission field is the place where we live and work.

My fourth observation has to do with Jesus’ power to transform people. The before-and-after portrait of the man in our story is altogether striking. Before, he was overrun by demons (8:27); now, he is free of them (8:35). Before, he was naked and out of his mind (8:27); now, he is clothed and in his right mind (8:35). Before, he was isolated and living alone in the tombs (8:27); now, he is found in the company of Jesus’ disciples (8:35). Before, he wanted nothing to do with Jesus (8:29); now, he is sitting at Jesus’ feet in a posture of receptivity (8:35). His transformation is nothing short of miraculous.

If you step away from this story, you will notice two other stories on either side of this miraculous healing which demonstrate Jesus’ power. In the story preceding our lesson, Jesus demonstrates power over nature, specifically, a storm at sea (8:22-25). In the story following our lesson, Jesus demonstrates power over sickness and death (8:40-56). In the span of a single chapter, Jesus demonstrates power over nature, the devil and his angels, sickness and our ultimate enemy, death itself. Jesus demonstrates power over everything that threatens to harm or annihilate us.

No doubt you will be able to find yourself somewhere in this chapter. You may struggle with a temptation that exerts mastery over you. You struggle with anger issues. You may be a chronic worrier and can’t seem to shed anxiety from your life. You may feel powerless to overcome feelings of resentment for somebody in this room, home or neighborhood. Jesus has the power to heal and liberate you. Invite Jesus to unleash his mighty power in your life.

The hymn written by Martin Luther that we will use to close our worship says it well: “And though this world with devils filled, should threaten to undo us. We will not fear for God has willed his truth to triumph through us. The prince of darkness grim, we tremble not for him; his rage we can endure, for lo his doom is sure, one little word shall fell him.”

What is this one little word that will fell the powers of darkness? This little word is Jesus—his power and truth to triumph through us.