

Lessons in Luke: Healing the Demon-possessed

Luke 8:26-39

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It was the summer of 1998 and I was on a trout fishing trip on Strawberry Reservoir with my family. We were probably three days into our trip and it was just a burner of a day. It was 90 something degrees and the humidity was next to nothing, which I know might sound better, but in this case it wasn't. I can still smell the sunscreen. It was something called Gator Screen and it felt like axel grease, and it still didn't keep the sun out.

So, we're out there in the middle of the lake in our 16 foot wooden rental boat, powered by a generous 9 horse Evinrude, when all of a sudden I noticed a tiny little cloud peak over the top of the mountain. My first reaction was relief because I thought, "Finally! Shade!" But my read on the situation quickly changed when that tiny little cloud began to double, then to triple, and in the span of a minute the entire western sky of the lake was consumed by a thunderhead.

The boats around us began to fly off of the lake, and we had the same idea, we just executed it much slower. I can still hear the motor, just going weeeeeeee. Before we had moved 100 yards the storm came. Hail. Not little hail, quarter-sized bits of ice began to pelt us. Then out of the corner of my eye I saw it: it was an unbroken white strip of waves that stretched from one side of the lake to the other. I remember looking back at my dad and he must've been able to see the look of panic on my face and the tears in my eyes, because he just kept saying, "We're okay. Stay calm. Just stay low in the boat." We're okay, stay calm, stay low in the boat.

Six people died in that storm and, given the circumstances, we were lucky to not have been seven and eight. But that isn't what I'll remember from that day. What I'll remember is my dad saying, "We're okay, stay calm, stay low in the boat."

Today is what you could call Part Two of the storm stories in Luke's Gospel about Jesus. In the passage we read just before our reading for today, we find Jesus and his disciples crossing the sea of Galilee, when a storm like the one I experienced in Utah consumed the lake. For what it's worth, I preached that sermon last summer

right here, about this time. In that story, just when things seemed the darkest, Jesus speaks to the wind and the waves. Calm. Be still. And the storm subsides.

The point of the story for the Jews reading it in the first century is that this Jesus is the man you're looking for. He is the Messiah. The word that hovered over the waters of creation speaking things from chaos to peace.

The storm in our reading for today is different and so is the audience, but there is no shortage of lessons for us to learn. So, let's dig into the story and see where it takes us (Luke 8:26-39).

²⁶ So they arrived in the region of the Gerasenes, across the lake from Galilee. ²⁷ As Jesus was climbing out of the boat, a man who was possessed by demons came out to meet him. For a long time he had been homeless and naked, living in the tombs outside the town.

²⁸ As soon as he saw Jesus, he shrieked and fell down in front of him. Then he screamed, "Why are you interfering with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? Please, I beg you, don't torture me!" ²⁹ For Jesus had already commanded the evil spirit to come out of him. This spirit had often taken control of the man. Even when he was placed under guard and put in chains and shackles, he simply broke them and rushed out into the wilderness, completely under the demon's power.

³⁰ Jesus demanded, "What is your name?" "Legion," he replied, for he was filled with many demons. ³¹ The demons kept begging Jesus not to send them into the bottomless pit.

³² There happened to be a large herd of pigs feeding on the hillside nearby, and the demons begged him to let them enter into the pigs. So Jesus gave them permission.

³³ Then the demons came out of the man and entered the pigs, and the entire herd plunged down the steep hillside into the lake and drowned.

³⁴ When the herdsmen saw it, they fled to the nearby town and the surrounding countryside, spreading the news as they ran. ³⁵ People rushed out to see what had happened. A crowd soon gathered around Jesus, and they saw the man who had been freed from the demons. He was sitting at Jesus' feet, fully clothed and perfectly sane, and they were all afraid. ³⁶ Then those who had seen what happened told the others how the demon-possessed man had been healed. ³⁷ And all the people in the region of the Gerasenes begged Jesus to go away and leave them alone, for a great wave of fear swept over them.

So Jesus returned to the boat and left, crossing back to

the other side of the lake. ³⁸ *The man who had been freed from the demons begged to go with him. But Jesus sent him home, saying,* ³⁹ *“Now, go back to your family, and tell them everything God has done for you.” So he went all through the town proclaiming the great things Jesus had done for him.*

The word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

Not So Distant Shores

Soon after Jesus calms the storm, he leaves the western side of the sea, which was predominately occupied by Jewish people, to head towards the eastern shore, where you would find mainly Gentiles, or people who were not Jewish. The main clue we get from the text that tells us this is true comes a little bit later when we hear about the pigs—Jews don’t eat pork and they didn’t keep pigs due to purity laws.

So what? What’s the big deal? Sometimes one of the things that we lose in the Bible, especially when we read it fast, is what the author is trying to tell us something by way of geographical movement of the characters. It is no small detail as Luke is trying to tell people about the breadth of the mission of God that he includes where this story takes place. This isn’t a Jewish kid that Jesus encounters on the shores of Galilee—he’s a Gentile.

Luke is telling us that the mission of God is on the move; from Israel to the Gentiles; from one shore to the other. What that should provoke in us is a question: Are we still a church that is willing to leave our shores to share our faith? Before you get images of missionary work, leaving your job, in your mind, take a moment to think about the way that more missionaries are coming to the United States to spread the Gospel today than the other way around. We ARE the Mission field. We are the unevangelized. So, the point isn’t that we need to go to some far off place, but that you need to go to the people in your home and in your office that are just as far away spiritually as this young man was 2,000 years ago, to share the Good News of Jesus Christ.

Calm

I suppose that begs the question of what you’ll do when you get there, right? Whether it’s your coworker, or your spouse, what exactly is supposed to happen in that exchange when you wash up on that not-so-distant shore? My sense of what Luke is trying to tell us in this story, and certainly his intended audience 2,000 years ago, is that Jesus is in the ministry of taking things from chaos to peace. It’s what happens in creation, and he does it with a word of calm to the wind and the waves in the storm on the lake, and then he does it with a word of calm to the wind and the waves in the storm in that young man.

Look, whether or not this man was filled with literal demons like you’d see in the movies, or if he was struggling with demons in the way we do when our lives fall apart, isn’t the point for me. The point is that for him, and I think for us sometimes as we seek to minister to people like him, what is needed isn’t something like a slick theological argument you would need a masters of divinity to do: It’s calm. It’s peace. A peace that surpasses all understanding. It’s Christ’s word embodied in us for them. How conveniently named our church is!

Think about our lives today, particularly the media environment in which we live. It is a chaos treadmill and we’re running on a 15% grade. It’s impossible to keep up, and that’s the point. Every time you turn on the TV cable news is turning up the pace. Do a mental scan of your Facebook and think of the things that people post about these days: politics, economics, racial reconciliation, jobs, busyness, the sandwich generation. These are storms; these are demons people are filled with. All of these people on your friends list aren’t looking for you to solve their problem or for you to amplify it, they’re looking for you to be the voice of Jesus in their life that speaks a word of calm, a word of peace into their storm.

The text for today says that after Jesus spoke to the man that the man “regained his sanity, was fully clothed, and was sitting at Jesus’ feet.” Sounds an awful lot like what happens to me when my wife steps onto my shore when I’m keyed up after something from work or in the news, and she just lets me talk it out. My blood pressure comes down. I can see clearly. I can rest. I can become me, my child of God self again.

Friends, I think that today the substance of our evangelism need not be an argument, but a gentle gaze, an unconditional positive regard, and a word of peace and calm.

Go and tell them

One of the misleading things about the way this story is tee’d up in the Bible is that the title is “the healing of the demoniac.” You might think it’s true because it’s a story about him. It isn’t. It’s a story about where God leads us when our lives are changed by the gospel of calm of Jesus. Just after Jesus calms the storm in the man, the man begs Jesus to let him go with him. He wants to go where Jesus goes to continue to do what Jesus is doing. But Jesus does something unexpected, right? He tells him no.

He tells him to go back home to your family and “tell them about what God has done for you.” To use recovery language, Jesus tells him to engage in the 12th Step. Share what’s changed your life. More specifically, share your story of moving from chaos to peace, from craziness to sanity. So, the man goes out and Luke is careful to

point out that he shares what Jesus has done for him.

Why'd he do that? Why did he change the words from God to Jesus. Well, one commentator that I read suggested that in the first story it was important to establish that Jesus checked all the boxes for Israel's expectation of a God-like Messiah by demonstrating big, creation-like power over a storm. Check. The point on this side of the lake, however, is to make a different case to a different audience, a Gentile one. An audience that didn't just worship one god, they worshipped multiple gods, and often times those gods caused the problems that plagued them. So a lot of the times when they prayed, it was A) Please be merciful, and B) Do you think you can do something about this problem you caused? The community of this man no doubt appealed to their gods to bring peace to this young man, but it didn't work. What Luke is trying to say, then, to this Gentile audience is this: The God you're searching for is right here. It's Jesus.

When I think about spirituality today it feels an awful lot like that in some ways: people, at least from where I'm standing, are appealing to their practice, their spirituality, their belief to bring peace and calm to their demons that plague them. I think what, who they are searching for is Jesus. To quote Paul in Acts 17, "the temple in your life dedicated to the unnamed God. That God is Jesus."

That doesn't mean that we're supposed to go and tell a bunch of people they're wrong or try to change their minds, but it also doesn't mean that we need to be silent about the source of our sanity.

Like I said, my dad kept saying, "We're okay, stay calm, stay low in the boat." He didn't calm the storm for us or for anyone. Heck, his twin brother and older brother's boat sunk in that same storm. It was wild. They were just on the other side of the lake from us. What my dad did accomplish with those words was that he calmed the storm in me. He didn't pray a special prayer, he didn't do anything overly spiritual in the moment. He just kept saying those words over and over.

It's Father's Day today, and I think sometimes it can be hard to figure out exactly what it means to be whatever it means to be a Christian dad. I can't tell you how many conversations I've had with dads that have been stumped by their kids questions, who then have taken a back-seat in faith and a front seat in the things they understand, like sports, where they know the answers. I get it. Teaching my kid about how to get set up in soccer is way easier than teaching him about the Apostles' Creed.

But, just about a month ago, something got into my son, a storm that he couldn't shake. It was just after breakfast, during church of all times, when Pastor Paul

was preaching about his dad, and he disappeared into his room. We didn't think anything of it at the time, but when it turned into 10, then 15 minutes, my wife went to check on him. That's when she called me into the room, where I found my little boy curled up in a ball on the floor of his room, taking wave after wave of tears.

We asked him over and over again about what was happening. No words. I found I wasn't going to argue him out of it, I wasn't going to convince him out of it. So I sat in front of him, got him to look me in the eyes, while we breathed deep. I know, it would be so poetic if I used the words my dad did, I didn't. But, in and out. In and out. And he finally squeaked out, "I'm so stressed."

You know, dads, sometimes our kids need us to leave the shores we're comfortable with to get in close with them, right where they are, and though they might be in the other room, believe me they can feel like distant shores. And when we get there it often isn't our best thinking, our biggest words that quiet their demons, it's the gospel of calm. Finally, and I know this is an epically meta arc, but as I think about it now it makes a whole lot of sense why I was able to be present for my son the other day and all of the other days he has needed me. It's because my dad was there for me, and for as much as I would have loved to stay in the safety of my father's house, I needed to be sent, I needed to go so that I could share with someone else, my son, this good news.

Friends, I hope that for those of you who are not fathers or who didn't have healthy relationships with your dad, you know that this message is one for you to carry as well, and one for you to hear as you minister to the people you love in this crazy world. We all have the spirit of Christ in us. And therefore we are all able to speak and to be the gospel of calm in the world.

And so may you leave your shores to find the people who are struggling against the waves of life, to be who Jesus was for this young man, the gospel of calm. And if you are like me, someone who has been rescued from that storm raging inside of you, I pray that you go and tell others about what God has done for you. And in doing so, I believe together we can join God in creating a world that looks more like God's Kingdom on earth as it is in heaven. Amen.