

²⁶When they get to the other side of the lake, in the Gerasene country opposite Galilee, ²⁷a man from the city is waiting for Jesus when he steps out of the boat. The man is full of demonic spirits. He's been running around for a long time stark naked, and he's homeless, sleeping among the dead in a cemetery. ²⁸⁻²⁹This man has on many occasions been tied up and chained and kept under guard, but each time he has broken free and the demonic power has driven him back into remote places *away from human contact*. Jesus commands the demonic force to leave him. The man looks at Jesus and starts screaming. He falls down in front of Jesus.

Possessed Man Don't torment me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God! Why are you here?

Jesus ³⁰What's your name?

Possessed Man Battalion.

He says this because an **army** of demons is inside him. ³¹The demons start begging Jesus not to send them into the bottomless pit. ³²They plead instead to enter into a herd of pigs feeding on a steep hillside near the shore. Jesus gives them permission to do so. ³³Suddenly the man is liberated from the demons, but the pigs – they stampede, squealing down the hill and into the lake where they drown themselves.

³⁴The pig owners see all this. They run back to their town and tell everyone in the region about it.

³⁵Soon a crowd rushes from the town to see what's going on out by the lake. There they find Jesus seated *to teach* with the newly liberated man sitting at his feet *learning in the posture of a disciple*. This former madman is now properly dressed and completely sane. This frightens the people. ³⁶The pig owners tell them the whole story – the healing, *the pigs' mass suicide, everything*.

³⁷The people are scared to death, and they don't want this scary abnormality happening in their territory. They ask Jesus to leave immediately. *Jesus doesn't argue*. He prepares to leave, ³⁸but before they embark, the newly liberated man begs to come along and join the band of disciples.

Jesus ³⁹No. Go home. Tell your people this amazing story about how much God has done for you.

The man does so. In fact, he tells everyone in the whole city how much Jesus did for him that day *on the shore*.ⁱ

In biblical times people took the existence of demons for granted.

Demons were agents of evil,

disciples of the devil,

Demons were noxious nasty ne'er-do-wells.

Demons were stealers of sanity,

disrupters of days.

Jesus goes out of country, to that far country, home of pigs and prodigals, place of pagans where a demon-possessed man awaits him.

I love worshiping with our friends at Primera Iglesia here in the sanctuary on Sunday afternoons. One Sunday Juan Sing, the pastor, was preaching on this text and I was following along in my Spanish Bible, when I came to a word I didn't know. Of course, that happens all the time, so I looked it up in my Spanish dictionary. The word referred to those unclean spirits, those demons. When Spanish speakers read this text they read that they are cesspool demons. They're the stuff at the bottom of the latrine. They are the defilers of whatever is decent. They have ruined that man's life so that he has even lost his *name* along with his *mind* and calls himself "Battalion" for they are so many.

Martin Luther must have thought about that man when he wrote:

And though this world with devils filled, should threaten to undo us,

we will not fear for God has willed the truth to triumph through us.

The powers of darkness grim, we tremble not for them;

their rage we can endure, for lo, their doom is sure; one little word shall fell them.

Of course we don't think the same way about demons and devils as did the ancients but we **DO** know the frenzied, incessant, ranting tyranny of the voices and urges that clamor, pitting ourselves against ourselves, splitting our energies, distracting and paralyzing us. Haven't we yearned for that little word to fell them?

The survival tactic for the day is: “Keep your Wits About You.” The first lesson is: Remain Calm. Do not panic. Be cool. Laugh at the risk. If you allow yourself to get too scared the demon is out of the bottle. You’re on a runaway horse.

When we’re in danger and feel afraid we get tunnel vision and miss visual clues. We block out sounds and signals. We get paralyzed and don’t react to the changing environment. One smart, highly trained, terrified young man, landing his F-18 Hornet fighter jet at 150 miles per hour on the deck of a rolling aircraft carrier lost his cool. He let his descent rate get away from him, got too low, and despite the signal light flashing in his eyes and the voice of the radio controller screaming in his ears, he flew the plane right into the stern of the ship. Something powerful blocked his perceptions and overrode his training. All he could think was, “get down, get down, get down!”

Fear and survival are locked forever in some primordial mating ritual in every one of us.

The villagers who went out to see for themselves this thing which had been done were surprised to see old Battalion sitting, clothed in his body and mind, listening to and learning from Jesus, with no more raving and thrashing about in the throes of torment, those townspeople fell into fear. They wanted no abnormalities in their lives. They’d tolerate no risks of such an unknown. They wanted the safe, tried and proven path. They lost Jesus in the process.

They *could* have marveled at the miracle and rejoiced at the healing and welcomed Battalion back into the community. They could have said, “Thank you!” for restoring our brother who used to terrify us so that we had to post a guard out here at the cemetery where he wandered. They could have fallen down onto their knees thanking God like the woman when she wiped Jesus’ feet with her hair and anointed them with her perfumed oils.

But they didn’t. They panicked. They asked Jesus to leave because somebody who can command demons, somebody more powerful than demons, somebody who defies demons – that somebody is even more terrifying than the demons themselves. There are those who’d rather continue on in illness than risk the new life on the other side of a healing. There are those who’d rather die than admit they need to change their point of view. There are those who’d rather cling to the old way of decay rather than risk following a new path. “Give us,” they say, “the old wineskins, cracked and useless though they be.” We prefer the demons we know over the sanity we don’t know.

They weren't *bad* people. They were frightened people. Fear shuts down our reason. Panic is a knife fight in a phone booth between reason and the blind yearning for survival. The bad news is that when we are frightened 90% of us suffer an IQ loss. We don't see, hear, or think clearly. Our fright becomes a hostile takeover of consciousness. We do **NOT** keep our wits about us. We become witless and clueless. We freeze, we have muddled thinking, we become the demoniac thrashing about in torment. Survivors are people who learn how to stay calm, to wrestle with the demons, to trust God in faith which frees and heals. That applies in plane landings, car crashes, water accidents and family arguments. Trust in the power of God and a big bank account of prayer is what carries us out of the grip of panic and into the arms of God.

Remember our solo:

Lord, the demons still are thriving in the gray cells of the mind:

Tyrant voices; shrill and driving, twisted thoughts that grip and bind,

Doubts that stir the heart to panic, fears distorting reason's sight,

Guilt that makes our loving frantic, dreams that cloud the soul with fright.

Lord have mercy.

Silence, Lord, the unclean spirit in our mind and in our heart;

Speak your word that when we hear it, all our demons shall depart.

Clear our thought and calm our feeling; still the fractured, warring soul.

By the power of your healing, make us faithful, true, and whole.

The power that breaks down the gates of hell is not a threat or a curse – it's a gentle laughter, a loving ease in the presence of fear. Just as surely as God is love, hell is fear. Hell is pigs rushing to their destruction. We children of God and keepers of faith keep our heads when in stress. We give God our hearts when in prayer. We stay in our right mind insofar as possible, listening to Jesus when in perplexity. For a mighty fortress is our God, a bulwark never failing. Thanks be to God!

ⁱ *The Voice of Luke: Not Even Sandals*, Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2007