

## IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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The Reverend David J. Powers  
Sunday, January 21, 2024

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So this morning we'll continue in our worship series entitled The Power of the Kingdom. We have spent the first two weeks of the year reflecting on some different parables. Actually, if you have spent some time reflecting on the text after Sunday morning worship, you've had a good bit of parables to go through and think about. This morning our text is going to shift a little bit. It's not going to be so much a parable, but what we do believe is that the story that we will read and reflect upon has indeed, as Jeanene told our children, something to teach us about the kingdom of God and its character. We'll read from the Gospel of Mark, the fifth chapter, starting in the first verse, but before we do let us go to God in prayer. Let us pray.

Gracious Spirit, as you moved across the waters of creation, we pray that you might move amongst us this morning, that you might make yourself known, that you might quiet us, that we might hear God's word for us this day, and that in hearing we might respond. So may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to you, God, our Rock and Our Redeemer. Amen.

The fifth chapter of the Gospel According to Mark—They came to the other side of the sea, to the region of the Gerasenes And when he had stepped out of the boat, immediately a man from the tombs with an unclean spirit met him. This man lived among the tombs, and no one could restrain him any more, even with a chain, for he had often been restrained with shackles and chains, but the chains he wrenched apart, and the shackles he broke in pieces, and no one had the strength to subdue him. Night and day among the tombs and on the mountains he was always howling and bruising himself with stones. When he saw Jesus from a distance, he ran and bowed down before him, and he shouted at the top of his voice, “What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I adjure you by God, do not torment me.” For he had said to him, “Come out of the man, you unclean spirit!” Then Jesus asked him, “What is your name?” He replied, “My name is Legion, for we are many.” He begged him earnestly not to send them out of the region. Now there on the hillside a great herd of swine was feeding, and the unclean spirits begged him, “Send us into the swine; let us enter them.” So he gave them permission. And the unclean spirits came out and entered the swine; and the herd, numbering about two thousand, stampeded down the steep bank into the sea and were drowned in the sea. The swineherds ran off and told it in the city and in the country. Then people came to see what it was that had happened. They came to Jesus and saw the man possessed by demons sitting there, clothed and in his right mind, the very man who had had the legion, and they became frightened. Those who had seen what had happened to the man possessed by demons and to the swine reported it. Then they began to beg Jesus to leave their neighborhood. As he was getting into the boat, the man who had been possessed by demons begged him that he might be with him. But Jesus refused and said to him, “Go home to your own people, and tell them how much the Lord has done for you and what mercy he has shown you.” And he went away and began to proclaim in the Decapolis how much Jesus had done for him, and everyone was amazed who heard him.

The grass withers and the flower fades, but the word of Our Lord endures forever. Amen.

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The scene is too vivid, too peculiar to need to add much to it, so I wonder if we might just walk through it a bit, if we might pay attention with new eyes and new ears to the details that we find in the text. I wonder if we might notice together just a handful of important things that we see when Jesus once again makes his way to the other side of the sea. Notice that first, beloved. Often in the gospels and particularly in the Gospel of Mark, as has already been pointed out to us in this series, interesting things happen when Jesus makes his way to a new place, a place that you wouldn't expect the Savior of the World to go. Just as he's making his way off of the boat, one who is unclean and known to be unclean makes his way to Jesus. It's interesting what the text tells us about the man. It doesn't give us a whole lot of history before he was possessed by these demons, these unclean spirits; but what it does say is that since he has been possessed by these unclean spirits, the people have done everything they can to restrain him. It's actually striking in this gospel account how much energy has been put into restraining this man, shackles and chains, certainly inhumane treatment. It's obvious just from the beginning of this text that the people have decided who this man is, what his value is, and what his danger is to them; interesting even more so because it doesn't say that he would go around hurting other people. The text says that he would howl day and night and...and inflict pain upon himself, but somehow even that infliction of pain is scary to the people that he might call neighbors. And so they put all the energy they can into trying to control him, and, alas, none of their efforts work. The chains are broken; the shackles cannot contain him. Notice further, beloved, that immediately this man and the...the energy that possesses him knows Jesus from the second that he sees him. Those that will be named Legion later on in the text, just a few verses later, they know who Jesus is, but in this moment what is interesting to me is that Jesus wants to know this man. When he saw Jesus from a distance, he ran and bowed down before him and shouted at the top of his voice, "What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High?" That which is within him knows immediately who this Jesus is. And then a few verses later, Jesus asked him, "What is your name?" We know, if we spend any time in scripture, how important names are. Jesus doesn't just want to know the deficiencies of this man, the unclean spirits, but Jesus wants to know who this man is. This man is unable to answer for himself, so those that live within him answer, "My name is Legion, for we are many." We'll see this over and over in the text, but evil spirits recognize Jesus. Even today if we hold the example of Christ up as a mirror to the world, evil gets exposed. It seems to let us know that the kingdom of God is a place where we are fully known, even in our brokenness, by our creator. There is no amount of uncleanness that will stop our savior from asking, "And who are you? What is your name?" Asking a question that he already knows.

Notice further, beloved, what happens here. The swine or the...the unclean spirits are asking, begging, scripture says, Jesus not to cast them out of this area. "Don't make us leave this region." And almost as if it was planned, they look over and there's this big herd of swine. We notice later it's 2,000 pigs there on the side of a hill. "Send us into the swine; let us enter them," the unclean spirit says. But Jesus didn't cast them into the swine. Jesus simply gives them permission, permission to leave the man and make their way into the herd. And Jesus doesn't cast them into the water that they might drown. They stampede into death and

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darkness. And if I was the man standing there, how relieved would I be to not only be cleansed but to know that the brokenness was once and fully shattered, died

Notice further, beloved, this healing—rather than trying to explain why the pigs drowned as a result of being possessed by demons, the text is interesting in showing us who holds power and who submits to it. From the Demon's absolute terror and begging, to Jesus's simple permission, the demons are helpless. This section of the text is awash with language of power, and it plainly points to the superiority of Christ in the midst of even the most difficult brokenness.

Notice further, beloved, though, there is a cost. While we might marvel at 2,000 pigs making their way into the sea, the shepherders aren't so happy. This is, of course, the way that they make money, the way that they provide for their families. They herd sheep. This is an economic transaction as well, it turns out. What it cost the community for this man to be made well is 2,000 pigs; and if that's the cost for one man to be healed, then the healing of all the people will surely bankrupt them. There's an implication here of Jesus having a different understanding of economy. Jesus is seeming to ask the people, “How much are you willing to give up for your friend to be healed? 2,000 pigs...or more?” It's a foreshadowing, of course, of what the cost will be for Christ even on the cross, how much Christ is willing to give up that the world might be healed. And they come in the aftermath after being told by the shepherders, they notice, beloved, that they come and they are scared. The people are scared because they know what this man used to be and act like. And when they come and they hear the story and they see the pigs, you imagine still floating in the water of the sea, they are terrified at what has taken place. Their response isn't joy and gratitude and hopefulness even for their own brokenness. Their response in the aftermath is fear. When people start getting healed, our response more often than not might be that we get scared. We question the legitimacy of the healing even if we see it before us. And the people understand that the cost is too high for them, and so, this Jesus they ask to leave them and their people and their land. So Jesus gets into the boat, and immediately upon getting back into the boat this same one, whose name he still doesn't know fully, comes to him and begs him that he might follow him. And instead and in contrast to the text that we heard last week where Jesus tells them to keep quiet the secrets of the Kingdom, in this case Jesus tells the healed man, “Go tell people about it. Tell them what I have done for you. Tell them that in me people who are bound up can be loosed from their chains. Tell them that your encounter with me allowed you to be freed. Tell them that nothing could keep you bound, and then I unbound you.”

People have different opinions on New Year's resolutions, right? We're 21 days in. Maybe you made some; maybe some of y'all are taking on a new intention or practice; others of you, maybe you're doing dry January. I don't know. I have a particular relationship with New Year's resolutions because I'm a time person. I like to...to mark time, and it just seems to me that New Year's is a good time for me. This New Year's Eve I thought about a conversation I had had a little over five years ago with a pastor friend of mine. He was sitting across from me in my study back in Georgia, and he was talking about the addictions that he had had to navigate in his life. He began to describe a particular kind of addiction. He said, “I smoked for...for 25 years.” I think about smoking. I never thought about it, about it as an addiction most certainly, but I didn't

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think about it in the way that he described it. He said, "I had to...I had to find an anonymous group (and I've asked him, by the way, if I could share the story this morning) had to find an anonymous group because I was addicted to nicotine." Now for some of you that might not hold the same weight as some other addictions, but if you have ever smoked, then you know how strong of an addiction nicotine can create in your life. He said, "I was addicted to smoking." And I've shared this with some of you before, but in that moment there was this kind of...this shot of energy that went through me. I had dipped for about 10 years at that time. I was up to two and a half cans of dip a day. If you are aware of the amount of nicotine that's in one can of dip, it's equivalent to more than two packs of cigarettes, okay? So just do the math, right. I would sit in my office with the door closed and...and I'd have a dip in, right. That was the way that I kind of kept my nerves calm during the day. Pastoring can sometimes get a little crazy, or at least that's what I told myself, right? He sat across from me in my study, and he said, "I was addicted to nicotine, and I had to figure out a way to shake it." And it was that shot of energy that went through me, said "All right, it's my time now." And so at 11:57 on New Year's Eve five years ago, I took out my last dip, and I threw it away. And I threw the log that I had purchased, which is not inexpensive, away; and this past New Year's Eve I got to celebrate five years of being nicotine-free. Here's the thing. Maybe some of you used to smoke; maybe some of you used to dip; maybe some of you used to drink; maybe some of you used to do drugs; maybe some of you are addicted in some other way. But here's what I want to posit to you this morning. The tombs in which the man that we read about here in the Gospel of Mark, the tombs in which he lived and moved about, they look different for each and every single one of us. That region, it might not look the same for you, but we are a people that know brokenness, and therefore we are people that know what it means to live amongst the tombs. When you live amongst the tombs, you know darkness. When you live amongst the tombs, you know addiction. When you live amongst the tombs, you know brokenness. When you live amongst the tombs, you know exclusion, whether outwardly forced upon you or inwardly chosen. When you live amongst the tombs, you know what it's like to try to restrain the evil in the world and in your life, and you know what it's like for nothing to help. You know what shackles feel like. You set intentions, you make decisions, and then they do not work. You're sober for a while, and then you have another drink. Whatever the tomb is, if we are honest with ourselves, we are not all that different from those who live amongst them. What this story in the Gospel of Mark seems to be telling us is that the kingdom of God, the one which Jesus is trying to bring about in the world—it is a place where people are drawn out from their tombs. It is a place where people are freed from that which burdens them, from that which has ruined their lives. The kingdom is a place where people see each other not as adversaries needing to be bound, or they even see their darkest self not as a part of them that needs to be bound, but needs to be freed. The kingdom of God is a place where evil seems to have power until Jesus shows up, and all of a sudden that evil submits to Christ. The kingdom of God is a place where God looses the grip of evil in the world and in our lives, and the kingdom of God is where that healing has a cost. In this text it was 2,000 pigs. For you it might be a friendship that has to end for you to be loosed of that addiction. For you, the cost might be that you have to endure some difficulty so that something beautiful and new might be born within you. If you are walking alongside one who is in the midst of living in the tombs, that cost might scare you. It might feel like it is too heavy or too high. What Jesus says is that the

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kingdom of God is a place where the economy that you have gotten used to doesn't matter anymore." It will cost and I will cover it. It will be difficult and I will labor with you." I'm not sure of the tomb in which you find yourself moving about today. What I know is that it's probably a scary place, probably a place that you kind of want to put outside of your city, the uh... the way in which you show up in the world, the...the way that you show up before others—you want to take that dark and difficult thing and just place that in another compartment of your life. But the truth is no matter how hard these people tried to push the Gerasene away, he was there; and what he needed was for the healing power of God to come across the water, to come off the boat, to greet him in that place, to ask his name, and then to have Christ cover him. The kingdom of God is a place where we are drawn out, where we are freed, where we understand and appreciate that evil and the power it possesses is loosed by Christ alone. Let us live into the freedom of that Kingdom this day.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, one God, Mother of us all. Amen.