

Legion No More: Confessions of the Gerasene Disciple¹

(Mark 5:1-20)

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ABSTRACT. A first-person narrative tells the story of Mark 5:1-20 from an imagined perspective of the man from whom Jesus cast out thousands of demons. The retelling reflects the author's desire to allow the biblical story to speak to contemporary experiences of mental illness and trauma. This interpretation attempts to incorporate understandings of demon possession and faith that ancient readers might have held while respecting the ongoing hard work required of modern believers coping with mental illness

KEYWORDS. Autobiographical biblical criticism, biblical autobiography, demon possession, faith healing, Gerasene demoniac, mental illness, post-traumatic stress disorder, self-harm, social location, unclean spirit.

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¹ I avoid the usual term Gerasene *demoniac* for this man in part because Mark prefers *unclean spirit* (a Jewish term) over *demon* (the Greek term), but also because I would rather identify the man by what he becomes, not by something that is not an essential part of who he is, something that by the end of the story has been eliminated.

I was a little disappointed when written stories about Jesus finally found their way to the cultural backwater of Gerasa, my hometown.² Hearing new stories about Jesus was wonderful. The disappointing part is that the gospel writers didn't tell my whole story. They wanted the drama of a happy ending, so they conveniently left out an important part. I suppose it grew out of a desire to spread the good news about Jesus, a commitment I certainly share. However, in my opinion, proclaiming the truth—the whole truth—is essential. They oversimplified, and this set a bad precedent that the world is still trying to live down. The good news is still good news, even if reality is complex and often involves one step backward for every two steps forward.

I'm talking about what happened after Jesus told the Legion to get lost. Driving out the spirits was a miracle! I don't argue with that. If you have never had unclean spirits take up occupancy within, you wouldn't believe the incredible relief it is to simply sit in silence, with no voices clamoring and outshouting one another in your ears. Thomas Troeger knows how to describe those voices: "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"³ When all of this hideous din abruptly ceases, the silence is profound. After they left, I sat there motionless, trying to catch my breath. I could feel pain in my throat—the pain you feel after you have screamed too long and too loud. I became aware of my frantic breathing, gradually slowing to a steady rhythm.

² All three synoptic gospels report similar exorcisms of demons or spirits but do not agree on the place name where the healing occurs. Textual variants and attempts to match place names in the gospel accounts with archaeological data only add to the confusion (Bruce Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, Stuttgart: United Bible Society, 23–24, 84). The use of the names Gerasa and Gadara in this account is arbitrary and may be considered one of the fictional elements in this retelling.

³ Thomas H. Troeger, "Silence! frenzied, unclean spirit," *New Hymns for the Lectionary: To Glorify the Maker's Name* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 52–53.

When my heart stopped pounding so loudly in my ears, another sound commanded my attention, distant but growing louder—a clamor of grunts and squeals and eerie screams, crescendoing into a wild cacophony. Turning my head in the direction of the noise, I saw pigs. Hundreds—no thousands—of pigs. Upside down pigs with hoofs beating the air. Pigs with hoofs smashing the heads and necks and bellies of other pigs. Most of them were plunging headlong down the steep, rugged hillside. The few who looked back to consider the thundering mass plummeting toward them were being trampled to death by the lucky pigs who happened to be on top. But luck for all was rapidly running out. Before I could begin to take in the whole chaotic scene, the first pigs, driven by the stampede behind them, began to hit the deep water at the foot of the slope. Squeals and grunts mixed with sounds of splashing and thrashing and gasping. Such a churning cauldron of swine flesh! As I stared, fascinated, it began to dawn on me that, just as the tyrant voices in my mind had fallen silent, so too the pigs were falling silent, one by one.

As flailing pigs intermingled with lifeless, belly-up pig corpses, suddenly the humor in an incongruous situation hit me. My hearty laughter filled the air, soon joined by that of Jesus. We laughed until we were breathless, gasped for air, and kept laughing. Who would have thought so many spirits could flee out of one person? Not even I, who had been listening to their shouting for years. Yet what a show it provided of the torment I had survived! What else but thousands of demons could explain the bizarre scene unfolding in front of us? Now that they were drowning by thousands, along with their pig hosts, I delighted in the irony and the rapid reversals of fortune. All those tormenters groveling before Jesus, pleading for mercy, must have been thrilled at first to be sent to a residence so close at hand. Horror soon followed when they found

themselves at the mercy of stampeding hordes headed straight for the water they so dreaded.⁴ The cold, deep water of the lake swallowed them up, one by one, and left their lifeless hosts drifting like a huge raft in the waves.

After the pandemonium had subsided, I sat a long time with Jesus, reveling in the peace and quiet. The swineherds had fled in the direction of Gerasa, and Jesus's companions had set off to collect firewood, leaving the two of us alone on the shore, watching the sunset. After a long silence, Jesus broke into the quiet. "How long had they been torturing you?" he asked, with a sympathetic smile.

"Must have been at least fifteen years by now," I offered, after a long pause. "I don't know exactly. Ever since my father died." Something about Jesus's quiet respect for my ordeal invited trust. I was also impressed that nothing I had said and done earlier had scared him off. "Dad died at the hands of Roman soldiers," I continued, spilling out a story I had long held inside. "I was just a boy. Dad and I had walked together to Gadara, the next village, to buy supplies. I remember—I was so proud because for the first time he had chosen me and not any of my older brothers to go along with him to help carry stuff home. We made our purchases and set out for home in the late afternoon. I was carrying the bag of salt.

"A group of Roman soldiers accosted us along a lonely stretch of road. One soldier challenged Dad and began to threaten him. He accused my father of giving him the evil eye. Dad pleaded for mercy, but the irritated soldier pulled out his sword and ran him through on the spot. I ditched the salt, ran, and climbed a nearby tree, terrified that the soldier was coming after me next. The Romans ignored me, however, and struck my unarmed father again and again with

⁴ Kathy Black, following David Tiede, argues that the demons drown along with the pigs; Black, *A Healing Homiletic: Preaching and Disability* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), 167–168; David L. Tiede, *Augsburg Commentary on the New Testament: Luke* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1988), 172–174.

their swords. I watched it all, coward that I was, perched high in the tree. I did nothing to help him. Once they figured he was dead, the soldiers wiped their bloody swords on the grass, grabbed the supplies we had purchased, and stuffed them in their packs. They left Dad there in the road, motionless and covered with blood. A long time after they had passed out of sight, I climbed down from the tree and pulled with all my strength on Dad's cold, stiff hand, trying to drag him off the road. I couldn't budge him an inch. I didn't want to abandon him, but the approaching darkness terrified me, so I left him there and hightailed it for home. When my brothers and I came back the next morning, he was gone."⁵

Jesus and I sat in silence in the deepening shadows, watching the flickering blaze his companions had managed to kindle, some hundred yards away, near their beached boat.

"That's the night the spirits first arrived," I continued after a pause. "I could hear them moaning on either side of the road. Behind the groves of trees. Then I could hear them inside me. 'Coward! Coward!' they whispered. At first, they whispered. But after that, every time I ever happened to be alone at night, more spirits would sneak in. And after there got to be enough of them in there, they got real bold. They started talking and clamoring in broad daylight. Sometimes they yelled at me, in my father's voice. Sometimes they used my brothers' voices. The worst was when they were yelling at me in my mother's voice. They would taunt me, 'Go climb a tree, little boy!' They were the worst when soldiers would provoke them. Any time a soldier came anywhere near, the whole chorus of spirits would start chanting, 'Coward! Coward! Climb a tree!' I'd take off running, as if I could outrun them, but it didn't help.

"Then one day a whole legion of soldiers marched down the highway through the middle of Gerasa. Thousands of them. I took off running, as usual, trying to get away from the heckling

voices of the spirits. This time I tripped and fell and cut my leg open on a sharp rock. I screamed bloody murder at the pain. That was how I discovered that the spirits would shut up at the sight

⁵ For the idea of ritual possession as a socially acceptable strategy for adjusting to intolerable circumstances, including those of colonial domination, see Paul W. Hollenbach, "Jesus, Demoniacs, and Public Authorities: A Socio-Historical Study," *Journal of American Academy of Religion* 49 (Dec. 1981): 567-588; Michael Willett Newheart, "*My Name Is Legion*": *The Story and Soul of the Gerasene Demoniac* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2004), 79-85. For introductions to the psychiatric conditions of self-harm and post traumatic stress disorder, see Laura E. Gibson, "Self-Harm," United States Department of Veterans Affairs, National Center for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, July 20, 2006, retrieved November 3, 2006, <http://www.ncptsd.va.gov/facts/problems/fs_self_harm.html>; Matthew J. Friedman, "Posttraumatic Stress Disorder: An Overview," United States Department of Veteran Affairs, National Center for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, July 20, 2006, retrieved November 3, 2006<http://www.ncptsd.va.gov/facts/general/fs_overview.html>.

of blood and the sound of screaming. I started calling those spirits the Legion. So ever after that, whenever the Legion got riled up, I'd find a sharp rock and slash myself and scream, and this would shut them up for a time.

"My mother didn't like this much. Ha! That's an understatement. It worried her a lot. I think one of the spirits must have gotten out and attacked her. She started crying a lot, every day, and shutting herself up inside the house and hardly ever eating. She would be awake all night and sleep all day long. My brothers got so worried about her that they decided they had to do something to keep the spirits from attacking her and me. They thought if they made chains and shackles and chained me down, then I couldn't do any more cutting. Without being able to draw blood to scare the Legion, though, the only thing I could do was scream when they started tormenting me. I screamed until my throat hurt.

"The spirits got much worse once my brothers chained me up. I tore at those chains night and day and finally managed to break free. But right away, my brothers would catch me and chain me up again. This happened—I don't know how many times—until I got smart and broke out of the chains at night. I cut myself until the blood flowed to keep the spirits quiet, then I fled out here to the tombs where I knew no one would bother me. The spirits of the tombs and of the

night kept their distance. The Legion I brought with me scared them off. Along with my blood and my screams, of course.

“I was afraid I would starve to death living out here in the tombs. But I needn’t have worried. Next morning Mom followed the drops of blood and figured out where I was hiding. After that, every week or so, she would show up with a bag of parched grain or dried fish or something, leaving it in an empty tomb. I didn’t want to upset her with all my scars and blood and all, so I would hide when she came, but she knew I was here—because of fresh footprints, I guess. She must have unclean spirits too. Why else would she keep coming out here to the tombs? I don’t know how many years I’ve been out here. Long enough to wear my clothes to rags. There’s nothing left of them.”

At this, Jesus took off his cloak and thrust it toward me. “Here,” he said. “Take this. I have a spare one in the boat.” He wrapped the coarse wool around my shoulders. I couldn’t believe how warm it felt in the chill evening breeze. What a difference—I’d almost forgotten what it was like to be warm after sundown.

“You know, Jesus,” I said, “those swineherds are likely to be back at sunrise with reinforcements, ready to give you trouble. All those dead pigs floating in the water—that’s their entire life savings. What do you say?—after you and your friends finish with supper—we get in your boat and row back to the other side of the lake. If you let me join your gang, I’ll do anything you ask. I’ll leave everything and follow you—not that I have anything to leave. No one around here is going to want me back in the family, even if the spirits are gone.”

In the end, Jesus didn’t take my advice. His men couldn’t face a boat trip in the dark; they’d had such a rough crossing on the trip over. They ended up stalling so long they were still around when the folks from Gerasa showed up next morning. The town folks were so astonished

to see me sitting calmly beside Jesus, wearing clothes, not screaming, all the blood washed clean off me, and the cuts neatly bandaged, that they kept a polite distance from Jesus and just begged him to leave the district. Lucky for him. As Jesus and his men were preparing to comply and heading for their boat, Jesus drew me aside. “Your people need to hear all the things God has done for you, and you’re the one to tell them,” he said. “It won’t be easy, but God’s mercy is great. Go home to your own people.” God’s mercy I already knew. Counting on God’s continuing mercy, I shoved their boat out into the water and headed home to my people, wrapping Jesus’ cloak tight around myself.

For months, I regaled friends and family and anyone who would listen with the story of all that Jesus had done for me. That’s the end of the story, as Mark and Luke would have it. I march off into the sunrise and no one ever hears from me again. It makes a great ending, but you have to know, it isn’t as simple as all that. Jesus drove the Legion out, but I don’t think I will ever be finished wrestling with the spirits that want to take Legion’s place.

Everybody knows, when unclean spirits go out of a person, they wander around dry places looking for somewhere to rest. The Legion drowned, but they must have already put the word out to their wandering friends that I made a good place to hang out. When one of these buddies would come in from the desert and find the Legion gone and the place empty, swept, and put in order, it would go out and find seven other spirits more evil than itself, and try to move in.⁵ This is when my hard work started. I had gotten a taste of peace and quiet, and I did not intend to let a bunch of thugs set up housekeeping and start to tyrannize me again. I had begun to see what a toll worrying about me had taken on my mother, and I vowed to learn other ways of coping with life besides slashing myself and screaming.

⁵ Matthew 12:43–45, Luke 11:24–26.

The first thing I did—I stopped keeping secrets. I told the rest of my family everything that happened the day my father died, something I had never done. When I told them the truth, I learned that my family did not blame me. They took me back. I learned to stop blaming myself for not protecting my father from the soldiers. I was just a boy, after all. My brothers assured me that even if all of them had come along on that fateful trip, they couldn't have deterred a dozen armed Roman soldiers. To try would have been suicide. Climbing a tree was a smart thing to do, they assured me.

Roving spirits try the hardest to move in on me whenever Roman soldiers come through town. When that happens, I have to fight with those unclean spirits. I have learned always to call for reinforcements. I get friends or family close at hand calling on God, and they send the spirits back to where they come from. Sending the Romans back to where they come from is another matter, though. They don't show any signs of leaving. Yet I have learned that hating them was like opening a door and inviting evil to walk right in. The Romans may occupy our land, but I don't have to let them tyrannize my mind with hatred. Now that God has wrapped me in his mercy, I know the days of this evil empire are numbered.⁶

Cutting myself and screaming gets the spirits to stop taunting me, but only for a little while. It also lets some of them sneak in silently when I am not looking. I still fall back into the old ways of cutting and screaming now and again. I don't think I'll every stop being vulnerable to it when the old terrors and hatred rise up. I try, though, to use the truth as a weapon against the spirits. Truth is like a gushing spring of water to evil spirits—it touches them and they dissolve. They hate the truth, and when I proclaim it loud and clear, the spirits back off in fear and head

⁶ For God's mercy as means to freedom from oppressive powers, see Richard Dormandy, "The Expulsion of Legion: A Political Reading of Mark 5:1-20," *Expository Times* 111.10 (July 2000): 335–337.

for the desert. The truth about Jesus, the son of the highest God, who makes the spirits obey him, is a strong weapon in the struggle. I learned that Jesus—the man who drove out my Legion, who shared my laughter, who gave me the cloak off his back—was crucified, but God raised him to life again.

More and more of the folks in our area are coming to believe now. All these believers stand ready to help each other when we need it. Together we keep making our stand against the spirits. With the help of Jesus and his spirit living in us, all those unclean spirits leave us alone.

Conclusion

This expression of autobiographical biblical criticism⁷ reflects a deliberate effort to write from the social location of one who lives with mental illness. I come from a family touched by mental illness in at least four generations, including myself. The particular nature of my experience with mental illness has clearly influenced my interpretation; those who live with other forms of illness would probably tell the story differently. My perspective as a middle-class, educated, middle-aged, North American woman of European descent has further contributed to this reading. Social-scientific critical perspectives have influenced my retelling, particularly the work of Hollenbach,⁴ Dormandy,⁶ and Malina and Rohrbaugh.⁸

The most difficult problem I wrestled with in writing this account was determining what to make of Mark's ending. Jesus's rejection of the man's desire to stay with him presents a potentially objectionable picture of Jesus, even though it may serve a purpose for Mark's larger narrative. Further, the Gerasene's instant healing can be troubling to those for whom recovery

⁷ For a description of this method and other examples, see Philip R Davies, ed., *First Person: Essays in Biblical Autobiography* (London, New York: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002).

⁸ Bruce J. Malina and Richard L. Rohrbaugh, *Social-Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 182–183, 208.

from similar symptoms requires years of treatment and hard work. Rapid and complete change fits well with the ancient concept of driving out demons; however, such an image offers little real-life help for modern readers who struggle to find hope and healing in the face of persistent obstacles to an immediate cure for brain disorders. I have tried here to construct an interpretation of the story that remains true to an understanding of demon possession that ancient readers and characters in the story might have held, yet also pays respect to the ongoing hard work required of modern readers with mental illness if we are to restore damaged relationships and remain on the path of recovery.