

## **CHANGE IS GONNA COME**

***Let us pray: Open our hearts today, O Lord, to feel the powerful strength and love you have for us. Help us to listen, not only with our ears, but with our spirits for your words of compassion and healing. Enable us to become more faithful disciples for you; for we ask this in the name of our Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.***

When Nancy and I met with the session of the Littleton Presbyterian Church in Marcy 1998 and told the elders I had accepted a call from the Wallace Presbyterian Church, the word quickly spread throughout that little town of 800 people. The next Sunday, the organist at the Littleton Church, a man named Marvin Newsom, talked with me after worship. He asked, “Isn’t Wallace in Duplin County?” When I told him, “yes,” Marvin said, “Well, I know one Bible story you won’t want to preach about down there in Duplin County.” I asked him which story. He chuckled and said, “The one about Jesus sending the demons into the pigs that drowned in the lake! I don’t think folks in Duplin County would want to hear about that!”

[Also in the conversation Marvin brought up another Bible story I shouldn’t preach on in Duplin County — John 2:1-12, the story about Jesus turning water into wine at the wedding in Cana. Marvin said that would be competition for the Duplin Winery!]

On October 12, 2008, I preached from the this story in Mark 5 about Jesus healing the Gerasene demoniac and sending the demons into the herd of pigs. During the week before, as I worked on my sermon, I emailed Wayne Casteen and Bill Saunders and asked them the market value of 2000 pigs. Using figures based on the Iowa/Southern Minnesota market for October 3 of that year, they estimated each 250 pound animal would be worth \$128.53, or about 51.4 cents per pound. When you crunch the numbers for 2000 pigs, you get a total of \$257,060. That’s a lot of money to have drown in a lake. I also remember very vividly Bill’s additional comment to the effect that if Jesus did that today, in addition to the cost of the animals you would have to add the expense of cleaning the lake of 2000 drowned pigs, EPA fines, etc., etc.!

Eleven years later I emailed Wayne and asked him for the same information. Here is our email thread:

Me: Wayne, when you get a chance, will you send me the current price per pound per hog on today’s market? I just looked online and it said 79 cents/pound.

Wayne: Phil, the current live hog price is about 59 cents/pound. The 79 is carcass value.

[Aside: I looked up the difference between the live hog price and the carcass value. I think I understand the difference, but I emailed Wayne again just to be sure.]

Me: Wayne, which figure would be most accurate in determining how much money you would lose if 2000 hogs died before they went to market?

Wayne: 2000 grown hogs at 280 pounds each at 59 cents/pound would be \$330,400.

Me: Thanks. Lotta pork

Wayne: Yup. Bout 12 truckloads!

Me: No wonder the people got mad at Jesus when he put the demons in the pigs and they ran into the lake and drowned!

[I went back and adjusted the 2008 hog size to 280 pounds and crunched the numbers, for a total loss then of \$287,840.]

If you've ever wondered if the Bible is really relevant to our everyday lives — if you've ever wondered if the Bible has anything to do with the nitty-gritty details of human existence — just listen to what happened after those 2000 pigs ran down the steep bank into the sea and drowned: “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 demoniac sitting there, clothed and in his right mind, the very man who had had the legion; and they were afraid. Those who had seen what had happened to the demoniac and to the swine reported it. ***Then they began to beg Jesus to leave their neighborhood.***” (Mark 5:14-17)

In last Sunday's sermon, I quoted Dr. N.T. Wright about the Trinity, who said, “Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, Good Friday, Easter, Ascension, Pentecost — these events function as a sequence of well-aimed hammer-blows which knock at the clay jars of the gods we want, the gods who reinforce our own pride or prejudice, until they fall away and reveal instead a very different god, a dangerous god, a subversive god, a god who comes to us like a blind beggar with wounds in his hands, a god who comes to us in wind and fire, in bread and wine, in flesh and blood: a god who says to us, ‘You did not choose me; I chose you.’”

After hearing today's story from Mark 5, we might add to N.T. Wright's list, “A God who comes to us in the midst of the tombs, a God who confronts and defeats the demonic powers that bind us, a God who disrupts the status quo and challenges our assumptions and upends the ‘stability’ we work so hard to maintain, a God who says, ‘Go home to your friends, and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and what mercy he has shown you.’”

Now, I'm assuming those who began to beg Jesus to leave their neighborhood were the owners of the pigs. The group probably also included some curious people from the neighborhood who knew the demon-possessed man. Maybe some of them had a financial stake in the herd of 2000 pigs. Perhaps some of them had a business contract with the Roman quartermasters to sell them salted pork to feed the troops. Whatever the reason — simple human curiosity or financial interest — they are in no mood to welcome the changes Jesus has brought to their neighborhood. Even though their neighbor, who has been tormented for years among the tombs, is now sitting quietly and fully clothed, they can't recognize and accept the change for good that

resulted from God's power at work in Jesus Christ. The good that came from God's power also brought amazing changes to the neighborhood.

During the summer between my junior and senior years in college, and then again for a year after college graduation, I worked on the staff of a private psychiatric hospital in northeast Atlanta. Whether or not it's fair to say the man in today's story was suffering from what we would call "mental illness," I saw people who fit his description — people who had to be restrained; people who were out of control; people whose families had given up hope of doing anything with them.

But I also saw the reactions of families when "the sick one" in the family got better. On more than one occasion, a family would bring a member to the hospital and say, "Mama needs help" or "We don't know what do with Daddy." Well, Mama or Daddy would spend a couple of weeks in the hospital, away from the family system. Mama or Daddy would be put on some medications or get their meds straightened out. Mama or Daddy would have some daily structure. Mama or Daddy would talk with doctors and counselors and their peers. And guess what? Lots of times, Mama or Daddy would get better and be released from the hospital. On more than one occasion, the same family would be back in a short time, bringing Mama or Daddy or even another family member, and say, "Something's wrong with Mama or Daddy or Junior." The problem, of course, was that, while Mama or Daddy or Junior might have had some problems, the real problem was with the family system. And when Mama or Daddy or Junior got better, it disrupted the family system. The change for the better was often too much for the other family members to handle.

Today's gospel story has a volatile mix of human suffering and financial interests. Add to that mix the amazing power of God at work in Jesus Christ, and it's no wonder things explode. A little bit of theological geography might highlight the significance of the story. As someone has said, Jesus isn't just "on the other side of the lake," Jesus is "on the wrong side of the tracks."

Some Bibles refer to the man in this story as the "Gerasene demoniac" while others call him "the Gadarene demoniac." The town name isn't as important as the region of the Decapolis, southeast of the Sea of Galilee [Decapolis means "Ten Cities" — no, not "Tin City"]. Jesus was in Gentile territory, far away from the Jewish center of Jerusalem and his hometown of Nazareth. On top of that, from a Jewish perspective, everything about this story is "unclean," that is ritually unclean. Jesus was among Gentiles. He was among the tombs of dead bodies. If you came into contact with dead bodies, you became ritually unclean. Jesus was dealing with demons. And, last but not least, Jesus was dealing with at least 2000 pigs, animals and food forbidden to the Jews.

However, none of these forbidden things stopped Jesus from doing what he always did — helping someone in need. On a broader scope, all of the "differentness" of the Gerasene district — the tombs, the demons, and the pigs — shows how God's power is at work and available ***anywhere and everywhere***, not just within the confines of the church walls, among "God's church people," according to the way we have always done things before. The backdrop of this story contrasts the power of God

at work in Jesus and the powers that bind us in this life and work against God, whether it is something like what the man in the tombs was suffering from or our financial interests or our traditions or our fears of the new and unknown or something else in life.

There's a subtle shift in this story as it moves along. At the beginning, we hear about a "man out of the tombs with an unclean spirit." He is wild, out of control, living a life of chaos, unable to be bound, isolated, howling and hurting himself. We can assume his neighbors tried their best ("no one could restrain him any more . . . no one had the strength to subdue him"). Perhaps they simply accepted things as they were. How could things change? The man's "strangeness" was defined by his neighbors' apparent "normalcy."

Then the demon-possessed man met the power of God in Jesus Christ, and his life was changed forever. What a remarkable contrast between verses 3-5 (where we read about his wildness) and verse 15 (where he is sitting there, clothed and in his right mind). The chaos has shifted from the "demoniac" to his neighbors. They are afraid. They are resentful. They beg Jesus to leave their neighborhood. Jesus brings healing and restoration and a sense of normalcy and hope to the man, but these very things cause turmoil and fear in the neighborhood. Things just aren't the same any more!

There's an even greater difference in the man's life between the beginning and the ending of the story. He moves from being filled with demons to being filled with gratitude and the good news. The healing is not an end in itself. He now has a commission in life, "to tell how much the Lord has done for you, and what mercy he has shown you."

The man responds obediently. He does more than just "tell or announce" what the Lord has done for him. He begins "to preach, to proclaim" what the Lord has done for him, to the very same neighbors who had begged Jesus to leave their neighborhood.

Jesus had to go back across the lake, but he didn't leave the people of the Decapolis without hope or without another chance to respond to the good news of what God was doing among *all* the people. The people didn't want Jesus in their neighborhood. The cured man, however, was a constant reminder of the power of God in their midst, and of how things can be so different.

The "new things" that come from obeying Jesus' call bring changes that threaten our comfort level and security we find in the status quo. As the old saying goes, "If we keep on doing what we've always done, we're going to keep on getting what we've always gotten." It's a strange psychological phenomenon, that human beings will often prefer the familiarity of the known (no matter how painful or difficult) to the unfamiliarity of the unknown (no matter how much better things might be).

Today's gospel story turns the old saying on its head: "Better the devil you know than the devil you don't know." How often are we content with the devil we know, with those things that bind us in life, because we are afraid of the changes we will be asked to make if we choose Jesus Christ? How often do we respond to Jesus' call by saying, "Yes, Lord!" until his call hits too close to home or our pocketbooks or the way we've always done things or the security we've established through our own efforts?

Last Saturday the East Community of the Presbytery of Coastal Carolina met at the Southport Presbyterian Church. That church recently dedicated a beautiful new facility. When the pastor, Rev. Ann Jahnes, welcomed us, she told us about the vision and the dream that congregation shared as they undertook their building project. They call it a “ministry center,” not a Sunday School building or a church office building. They did not build it just for themselves. They open the facilities to many different community groups. Obviously they take care of the facility, but they have opened their hearts, their minds, and their building to their neighborhood, trusting that God will do wonderful and new things in and through their church.

There are folks among us who tell us how much the Lord has done for them and what mercy God has shown them, if we will only listen. There are opportunities for change, chances for new things in our church and in our community and in our lives. God is good. Go and tell people how much the Lord has done for us and what mercy God has shown us.

***Let us pray: We have hope in the saving grace of Jesus Christ! We have hope because your Son is working in and through each of us! We have hope in your forgiveness! God, remind us of our hope, even in the midst of despair, heartbreak, and stressful situations. Thank you, Lord, for your love for us made real in Christ. May we embody Christ in all we do. Amen.***