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Mark 5.¹⁻⁵

¹And they came over unto the other side of the sea, into the country of the Gadarenes. ²And when he was come out of the ship, immediately there met him out of the tombs a man with an unclean spirit, ³who had his dwelling among the tombs; and no man could bind him, no, not with chains: ⁴because that he had been often bound with fetters and chains, and the chains had been plucked asunder by him, and the fetters broken in pieces: neither could any man tame him. ⁵And always, night and day, he was in the mountains, and in the tombs, crying, and cutting himself with stones.

Meditation

“Possession” is most often interpreted as one independent life force being invaded and controlled by one or more other independent life forces. It is abundantly clear that in the pre-scientific world, such “possession” was more than rhetorical explanation. The phenomenon of “possession” was viewed as a literal reality. It is also clear that such phenomena were thought to be not uncommon.

The Greek word for “demon,” usually associated with an “evil” spirit, is *daimon*. It might surprise the reader to know that this word, *daimon*, “demon,” refers to both good and evil influences. It can refer to a deity as well as an “evil” spirit. Zeus, for example, was a *daimon* in the Greek mind. Other Greek Gods such as Apollo, Ares, Hera, Aphrodite, and Dionysus were also called, *daimon*. The idea of *daimon*, then, was not so much about “evil” as it was about “power,” “force,” “control,” or “influence.” *Daimon* was indicative of an overwhelming force or influence. Of course, an “evil” *daimon* was an overwhelming power, force, or influence that was destructive. It was one that distorted an individual’s view of self and the world around them.

To my knowledge, I have never had experience with the phenomenon of literal and traditional “possession” or an individual under the influence of another life force. I have, however, had experience myself and witnessed in others great emotional, psychological, and spiritual disturbances. In some, these have stemmed from influences and powers that were overwhelming and nearly or completely uncontrollable. Wherever the truth lies about the traditional and literal form of “possession,” I do believe that what we identify as powerful and overwhelming emotional and psychological disturbances today would have been interpreted as instances of “possession” in the ancient world.

In today’s reading, we meet a man whose view of himself had become so distorted by negative influences in and upon his life, that he was suicidal. This is what I understand the text to be telling us when it reports that the man “had his dwelling among the tombs.” He wished to be dead. To my mind, the text’s report that he was often found “cutting himself with stones” confirms his suicidal feelings and that he had acted on his desire for death by attempting suicide on multiply occasions.

In addition to having a distorted and negative view of himself, the man had a distorted view of others. This caused him to be seen as a threat and caused those who deemed him a threat to attempt to control him in order to reduce the threat. This is the meaning behind the text’s report that he was “often bound with fetters and chains.” However, the influences that were so overwhelming in his own life made it impossible for others to control him or the threat he posed. This is the meaning behind the text’s report that he “plucked asunder” the chains by which he was bound and that “neither could any man tame him.”

For me, here is the bottom line. This is what I learn from this inspired text. The world is full of evil influences, forces, and powers that distort individual’s view of themselves and of those around them to the point that they can become, a) suicidal and b) murderous. These influences are sometimes

beyond individual's or even society's ability to control. Today, we see these influences at work in our own lives, in the lives of those closest to us, and in millions of our fellow national and global citizens. Unfortunately, we are hastening toward, indeed have already entered the initial stages of a time when so many are overcome by these overwhelming, dehumanizing influences that our entire society, the whole global family will experience complete societal madness, the distortion being so pervasive that self-destructive behavior, mass suicide, and mass killing become the order of the day.

And, finally, as we will see as the narrative progresses, there is only one solution to the problem. There is only one who has the power to take control, cast out the *daimon*, the overwhelming influences, and heal the individual and society. That One is none other than Jesus of Nazareth, Savior and King. We will, then, want to listen to and watch him carefully as the narrative progresses. Our life, the life of those we love, the sanity of the entire planet may depend upon it.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

Mark 5.¹⁴⁻²⁰

¹⁴And they that fed the swine fled, and told it in the city, and in the country. And they went out to see what it was that was done. ¹⁵And they come to Jesus, and see him that was possessed with the devil, and had the legion, sitting, and clothed, and in his right mind: and they were afraid. ¹⁶And they that saw it told them how it befell to him that was possessed with the devil, and also concerning the swine. ¹⁷And they began to pray him to depart out of their coasts. ¹⁸And when he was come into the ship, he that had been possessed with the devil prayed him that he might be with him. ¹⁹Howbeit Jesus suffered him not, but saith unto him, “Go home to thy friends, and tell them how great things the Lord hath done for thee, and hath had compassion on thee.” ²⁰And he departed, and began to publish in Decapolis how great things Jesus had done for him: and all men did marvel.

meditation

It does not matter how many times or how often I read the story of the man named Legion, I am always completely transfixed by the image of the man “sitting at Jesus’ feet” “clothed, and in his right mind.” I am utterly transfixed by the absolute and full contrast between the man’s condition after his encounter with Jesus and that before his encounter with Jesus—naked, wounded, hated, uncontrollable, suicidal. The contrast between the two men—one before or after his encounter with Jesus—is so complete and so stark that I can’t help but lift my eyes, as this man must have done, to look upon the face of Jesus with respect and love and hope. I can’t help feeling my own mind calmed and changed and enlivened.

I am no less transfixed when I hear the man’s plea that “he might remain with Jesus.” Here, too, I am transfixed by the contrast between the before and the after. This is the same man who just moments earlier had expressed concern and unworthiness, “What have I to do with thee, Jesus, thou Son of the most high God?” This is the same man who just moments earlier had expressed his doubt about Jesus and his intentions toward him, “I adjure thee by God, that thou torment me not.”

But look at him now! All worries about his worthiness have been cast aside. All concerns about Jesus’ intentions have disappeared as if less than a mist. Once again, this man named Legion calls out to me. Draws me to Jesus. Convinces me that he can be trusted no matter how legion the overwhelming forces are that threaten and destroy my worthiness before him. Convinces me not only of the joy I can find in Jesus’ presence, but of the joy that Jesus finds in being present in my life.

In the past 20 to 30 years, we LDS have become a Book of Mormon people. This has, too often, come at the expense of the other standard works and our appreciation and understanding of them. I don’t think, at least I hope, that this was not intended. It is tragic. It is most tragic when one considers the four Gospels. There is nothing like them. In them, we get closer to a first person revelation of God than anywhere else, including the Book of Mormon.

Because of this near singular emphasis on the Book of Mormon, we are familiar with the story of Alma the Younger and the transformation that took place in his life upon his encounter with Jesus, Son of God. Previous to this encounter, Alma was tormented and “harrowed up to the greatest degree and raked with all [his] sins.” So vivid was his sense of guilt and unworthiness that “the very thought of coming into the presence of [his] God did rack [his] soul with inexpressible horror.” It all felt, to him, like “the pains of hell.”

It was while in this state that he finally cried out to Jesus, as Legion had done, and encountered Jesus.

Like Legion, he was transformed by the encounter.

“And oh, what joy, and what marvelous light I did behold; yea, my soul was filled with joy as exceeding as was my pain! . . . Yea, methought I saw, even as our father Lehi saw, God sitting upon his throne, surrounded with numberless concourses of angels, in the attitude of singing and praising their God; yea, and my soul did long to be there” (See Alma 36.¹²⁻²²).

One can almost hear Mark’s, “sitting, and clothed, and in his right mind” in Alma’s testimony. Indeed, there is little doubt in my mind that both men experienced the same thing. Both men were transformed to and from the same demons. Both men discovered Jesus to be the most attractive of all beings. Both men wished to remain with him and have him remain with them. And both men were send into the world to tell the good news of Jesus’ transforming power and of his generous and accepting character.

Both men deserve to be heard. Both men draw us to Jesus, Son of God. Both men fill us with confidence in him. Both men fill us with the confidence to enter his presence and let him work his transforming work in our lives. This is a message and a moment that truly calls forth the plea which we so often invoke:

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

Mark 5.²⁴⁻³⁴

²⁴And Jesus went with him; and much people followed him, and thronged him. ²⁵And a certain woman, which had an issue of blood twelve years, ²⁶And had suffered many things of many physicians, and had spent all that she had, and was nothing bettered, but rather grew worse, ²⁷When she had heard of Jesus, came in the press behind, and touched his garment. ²⁸For she said, “If I may touch but his clothes, I shall be whole.” ²⁹And straightway the fountain of her blood was dried up; and she felt in her body that she was healed of that plague.

³⁰And Jesus, immediately knowing in himself that virtue had gone out of him, turned him about in the press, and said, “Who touched my clothes?”

³¹And his disciples said unto him, “Thou seest the multitude thronging thee, and sayest thou, Who touched me?”

³²And he looked round about to see her that had done this thing. ³³But the woman fearing and trembling, knowing what was done in her, came and fell down before him, and told him all the truth.

³⁴And he said unto her, “Daughter, thy faith hath made thee whole; go in peace, and be whole of thy plague.”

Meditation

What a time and place, like nearly all times and places, to be a woman! It was not and is not easy even in the best of circumstances. But it was not the best of circumstances for the ailing and desperate woman who braved potential rejection and humiliation to approach and touch Jesus, a man she had concluded had the power to deliver her from her long affliction. To appreciate just a little the nature of her affliction, we have to consider the culture and religious environment in which he suffered—for suffer, she most certainly did.

“And if a woman have an issue of her blood many days out of the time of her separation, or if it run beyond the time of her separation; all the days of the issue of her uncleanness shall be as the days of her separation: she shall be unclean. Every bed whereon she lieth all the days of her issue shall be unto her as the bed of her separation: and whatsoever she sitteth upon shall be unclean, as the uncleanness of her separation....”

“Thus shall ye separate the children of Israel from their uncleanness; that they die not in their uncleanness, when they defile my tabernacle that is among them. This is the law of him that hath an issue...”¹

Perhaps it is unnecessary, but we feel the need to clarify. First, we are talking about vaginal bleeding. When the text speaks of “the time of her separation,” it is referring to a woman’s monthly period, when, according to her religion, God required her to physically separate herself from others—particularly men—because she was considered to be unclean herself and a source of defilement for others. Because a woman was considered unclean and a source of defilement during her monthly period, she was not only excluded from contacts with men, but with God—naturally enough since God was male. This meant that she was excluded from participating in any religious observance—observances that in the early years of the faith took place at the tabernacle, later in the temple, and later still in the synagogue.

Just let that sink in. Women were taught and made to feel that every month there were several days when they could not participate in cherished religious services and during which they could not approach God lest they defile Him. But, for some women, it was even worse. If vaginal bleeding

¹ Lev. 15.^{25-26, 31-32}

went beyond the monthly bleeding, a woman was unclean and excluded from public religious observances for as long as the bleeding continued.

Now, the woman who approached Jesus so surreptitiously, we learn, had been experiencing vaginal bleeding for twelve years, notwithstanding her numerous and desperate attempts to find a cure. We should not and do not underestimate the physical discomfort and emotional anxiety that her ailment brought into her life every single day. When one is seriously ill, just the uncertainty can, for some, be nearly debilitating: “What is wrong with me?” “Am I dying?”

But, imagine adding to these painful uncertainties and anxieties, the spiritual element. Imagine being excluded from all worship services. Imagine, further, this woman being taught and believing over twelve long years that she was unclean in the eyes of God. Imagine how she felt about herself, believing that God viewed her as defiling; that he wanted nothing to do with her.

But let your imagine run further. Let it roam over centuries, millennia. Let it roam from one end of the earth to the other. Let it roam over millions and millions of women. Let it consider that over all that time and space, all women were made to feel unworthy in the eyes of God for a few days each month and that some women, like the woman who came to Jesus, were made to feel unworthy in the eyes of God for years, for lifetimes.

Words fail to express how repulsive and hateful this is. So, I’ll just say it. This was never of God. I do not believe that for one nanosecond. There may be a number of objections to my firm assertion. I will address two that I have most often heard. First, some claim, the Old Testament law is replete with principles taught through types and shadows. This matter of uncleanness through vaginal bleeding is one example. The blood is a type for sin. And sin does make one unworthy before God. This apologetic is to be firmly rejected on several counts. First, the religious mind does not need types and shadows to make it feel unworthy through sin. Such feelings are as common to the religious mind as breathing is to the body. Second, this rational it is the sort of characterization of scripture that would just be silly if it were not so belittling toward scripture. But, most importantly, such a view presents to us a God who is willing to sacrifice the emotional, psychological, and spiritual wellbeing of women over many millennia in order to “teach a principle” and “make a point” to future generations that is already far too obvious and experienced. In a word, this apologia is nonsense.

This leads us to the second apologetic. Even though, the argument goes, women were viewed as institutionally unclean because of their vaginal bleeding, God didn’t really feel that way about them. They could have had their own private assurances of God’s love and respect and acceptance of them through personal revelation. This too, must be rejected. For it is a strong and unusual woman—indeed, a strong and unusual individual, male or female—who can rise above a doctrinaire institutional position and chart their own course independent of it and unaffected by it. And if there was that rare woman here and there, what of the other millions? No, women would have felt the emotional, psychological, and spiritual wound that this “policy” inflicted.

This business of a woman being unclean and defiling to God because of vaginal bleeding must be seen as coming from men. It was always inspired by ignorance and a drive to control and dominate women. But I’ll say more, honestly and bluntly. I am disturbed that God let it go on for so long in so many places in violation of so many women. I am troubled that He seems to have so little power that He could not or would not overcome and put a stop to this male-driven religious ignorance. I wonder about any doctrine that presents Him as omnipotent. I am not surprised there are atheists.

Yes, this causes a disturbance in the force. And, finally, I wonder. I wonder what ignorance we are perpetuating today that will look as vile and hateful as this ancient religious ignorance that consigned

women to feel unworthy and unappreciated and unacceptable to God because of vaginal bleeding. But, there is one thing I am not uncertain about. I am not uncertain about the fact that such ignorance is still very much present even in the most enlightened moments of modern religious faith. It is present in the faith formerly known as Mormonism.

Now, how's that for an ending? We will go on in the next meditation to reflect on what Jesus did to and for the woman with a twelve year long "issue of blood." It shines bright with hope. So, for now, we conclude as we always do.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

Mark 15.²²⁻³⁸

²²And they bring him unto the place Golgotha, which is, being interpreted, The place of a skull. ²³And they gave him to drink wine mingled with myrrh: but he received it not. ²⁴And when they had crucified him, they parted his garments, casting lots upon them, what every man should take.

²⁵And it was the third hour, and they crucified him. ²⁶And the superscription of his accusation was written over, THE KING OF THE JEWS. ²⁷And with him they crucify two thieves; the one on his right hand, and the other on his left. ²⁸And the scripture was fulfilled, which saith, "And he was numbered with the transgressors."

²⁹And they that passed by railed on him, wagging their heads, and saying, "Ah, thou that destroyest the temple, and buildest it in three days, ³⁰Save thyself, and come down from the cross."

³¹Likewise also the chief priests mocking said among themselves with the scribes, "He saved others; himself he cannot save. ³²Let Christ the King of Israel descend now from the cross, that we may see and believe."

And they that were crucified with him reviled him.

³³And when the sixth hour was come, there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour.

³⁴And at the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice, saying, "Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?" which is, being interpreted, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?"

³⁵And some of them that stood by, when they heard it, said, "Behold, he calleth Elias."

³⁶And one ran and filled a sponge full of vinegar, and put it on a reed, and gave him to drink, saying, "Let alone; let us see whether Elias will come to take him down."

³⁷And Jesus cried with a loud voice, and gave up the ghost. ³⁸And the veil of the temple was rent in twain from the top to the bottom.

meditation

In a laudable desire to comfort, the writer of Hebrews assured his readers that "we have not an high priest which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities; but was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin" (Heb. 4.¹⁵). Thus, we have a tutor to direct us through life's labyrinth of temptation. The writer succeeded in comforting, at least, he did with me. I believe his witness and make use of it constantly. But, in declaring that Jesus "was in all points tempted like as we are," it seems to me that he was not being exactly accurate. It is saying far, far too little of Jesus' temptations.

It seems certain that Jesus temptations went well beyond, infinitely beyond any temptation any other human being ever faced or will face. Indeed, he "descended below them all" (See DC 122.⁸). It is, in fact, impossible to imagine the sorts and levels of temptation that Jesus assuredly endured and transcended. But, as usual, the impossibility shouldn't stop us from imagining as much as we are capable.

Imagine, for example, having the power to deliver oneself from any discomfort, any suffering, any form of death. Imagine then experiencing the worst possible discomfort and the worse possible suffering, and facing the worse possible sort of death. Imagine, finally, not using the power you possess to deliver yourself from that discomfort, that suffering, and that death. What willpower! What love!

And then, imagine that nearly everyone around you, friend and foe alike, tempts you to demonstrate the power you claim to possess to deliver yourself from discomfort, suffering, and death. Imagine the appeal to action at the time of your arrest. Imagine the appeal to action at the time of humiliation. Imagine the appeal to action during your suffering. Imagine the appeal to action, not only to relieve yourself from the discomfort, suffering, and death, but from the humiliation of ridicule. Imagine how tempting it is to prove yourself right and everyone else wrong. Imagine how tempting it is to justify all that you have said and done, indeed, to justify your very existence. Or, if you are better than all of that, imagine how tempting it is to act so that others will be convinced of your righteous claims and thereby be saved.

It is no accident that the Gospels record the temptations that Jesus faced to ease himself of and deliver himself from all discomfort, suffering, and death. Though the first recorded incident of this temptation took place in the desert at the urging of Satan, it seems almost certain that it was part of his life long before that. Though it might seem the temptation ended with his death, I often wonder. Does he suffer still? Does he suffer because of us? Is he ever tempted to end the suffering by eliminating us, the cause of so much divine suffering? But, no, he continues to suffer with an eye towards others' advancement.

In Jesus' final, "'Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?' which is, being interpreted, 'My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?'" we hear, perhaps, Jesus at his lowest, deepest suffering. He found out what all the rest of us so often feel, alienation from God. But, oh how much worse for him; for he had always lived in an intimacy with God that is beyond our present experience or even imagination.

"And he that sent me is with me: the Father hath not left me alone; for I do always those things that please him" (Jn. 8.²⁹).

If there was ever a moment when he examined the possibilities of self-preservation, this must have been it. But, he endured. He resisted. He conquered. And thereby, he revealed the unimaginable grandeur of the Divine Character. And by that revelation, we are, or can be saved. So, focusing on Jesus' suffering and death on the cross is most certainly not an exercise in morbid focus on the dying and dead Christ.

"For the preaching of the cross is to them that perish foolishness; but unto us which are saved it is the power of God... But we preach Christ crucified, unto the Jews a stumblingblock, and unto the Greeks foolishness; but unto them which are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God, and the wisdom of God" (1 Cor. 1.^{18, 23-24}).

Good Friday and the Easter Season are times to more deeply examine, learn, and apply the many, many lessons Jesus taught us from his high and lofty cross. It is a time to discover that humble portion of power that we have and commit ourselves to use it, not for self-preservation, but for the betterment of all those around us. Lent and Easter represent a time to commit ourselves to "deny" ourselves and "take up [our] cross, and follow" Jesus. "For whosoever will save his life shall lose it: and whosoever will lose his life for my sake shall find it" (Matt. 16.²⁴⁻²⁵).

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

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