

Restored to our Right Mind

I. A New Identity in Christ

- A. The apostle Paul opens his letter to the church at Colossae with the prayer that they *“may be filled with the knowledge of God’s will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding...”*
 - 1. Through their faith in Jesus Christ, he says the gospel has been bearing fruit and growing in them, and he adds, just as it is growing in the whole world.
 - a. To be more explicit, he says this growth is very tangible. It is evident in the fruits of faith, hope and love.
 - b. Their growth he says, is a confirmation that God *“has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son....”*
 - 2. In Paul’s vision, life in Christ is a new identity – the new life frees us from enslavement to so many competing *‘principalities and powers,’* as he would describe them,
 - a. *‘rulers and authorities’* in the heavens and the earth that seek to make us their subjects.
- B. We hear a similar theme of a seismic shift with universal consequence in the first lesson, an excerpt from what has been called one of the most eloquent speeches in the O.T.
 - 1. The writers of the Book of Deuteronomy use the historical context of Moses giving his last appeal to the people of Israel, after 40 years of wandering in the wilderness, just before entering the promised land.
 - 2. Moses says, *“God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your descendants so that you will love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, in order that you may live”* (30:6).
 - 3. The commandment of God, says Moses, is universally accessible, not far off that you have to go up to heaven to retrieve it, or across the sea, that you may hear it and observe it.
 - a. *“No, the word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe”* (30:14).
 - b. It is the same vision of the future expressed by the prophets Jeremiah and Ezekiel that the word of God will no longer be some external commandment, written on stone, that Israel has no power to obey.

- c. Rather, God will transform their inner mind and spirit to implant the will to love God with their whole heart, so that they may live and abundantly prosper in all their lives.

C. The Gospel story today tells of the healing of the Gerasene man afflicted by a “*legion*” of demonic forces.

- 1. It is the only account in Luke’s gospel in which Jesus deliberately goes into Gentile territory.
- 2. It is a boundary crossing story that foreshadows the time when Jesus’ disciples will be sent to be witnesses “*in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the Earth,*” as Luke writes in Acts 1:8.
 - a. The story tells us that the grace of God reaches beyond every barrier that human sin has built.

II. Salvation for the Oppressed Man

A. The 8th ch. of Luke’s gospel contains a whirlwind of Jesus’ teaching, preaching and miracle working.

- 1. The miracles are like sign posts that point to the authority of one who proclaims God’s coming kingdom.
 - a. With God’s authority Jesus has power over nature, demonic forces, illness, and even death.
- 2. The story today comes out of the depths of Jewish cosmology
 - a. with its telling of the unclean territory of the tombs,
 - b. a man’s possession by demonic forces,
 - c. the unclean swine,
 - d. and the destruction of the demons in a watery grave.
- 3. The story depicts a battle that Jesus wages against the powers of evil as the kingdom of God is revealed in his work and presence.
 - a. The story is one instance in the movement of Luke’s narrative, ---
 - (1. that Jesus brings good news to the poor,
 - (2. and reverses the fortunes of those of low estate.
 - (3. Jesus comes to seek and save the lost.
 - b. ‘*Healing*’ and ‘*salvation*’ are the same work,
 - (1. In the Gk language they are the same word.

B. Jesus’ healing of the man possessed by demons, is a story of salvation, experienced here as the restoration of personal autonomy and freedom.

1. Our world is skeptical of demon possession and exorcism and we likely call that kind of belief, superstition.
 - a. But we will be side-tracked in hearing this story if we try to explain away the Gospel writer's world view.
 - b. The point of the story is a spiritual healing that includes the healing of the man's physical state and goes on to the restoration of the man to his "*right mind*," the integrity of his personal identity. -----
2. The demoniac's response to Jesus is one of the more heartbreaking verses in Scripture.
 - a. Asked for his name, the man replies that he has none;
 - b. or, more accurately, he says his name is "*Legion*,"
 - (1. a 'multitude,'
 - (2. too many demons to count.
 - c. He has lost himself in a cacophony of voices and has ceased being himself in any way.
 - d. So he spends his days raving alone in the wilderness,
 - (1. a danger to himself and others,
 - (2. ostracized from his community and his own mind.
- C. This man's condition in its extreme may help shed light on the chaos of our own souls when we are overwhelmed by voices raging at us from inside and out.
 1. We must ask ourselves, are we even aware of the voices that hi-jack our mind & body and drive us to places of loneliness and despair?
 2. Can we begin to name the powers that overwhelm the sacred depth of our lives created as children of God?
 3. Like the man whose life is far beyond his control, so many forces and realities around us undermine our freedom to choose and make decisions as truly centered persons:
 - a. On a personal level, we may face vocational concerns, financial pressures, broken relationships, the expectations of others, the day-to-day details of life that eat away at our time and resources.
 - b. The larger world impacts us ever more closely with war and violence, famine, poverty, racism, disease, climate catastrophe, mass immigration, and more.
 - c. How can we possibly center our lives in the one reality that is foundational in our creation, being in relationship with God? ---

- D. Jesus' healing of the Gerasene is a Gospel statement, Good News of God's grace: the names and claims the voices of this world may shout at us, --- these do not have the last word.
1. These need not be our defining reality.
 2. There is another way that has been held before us by our spiritual traditions for millennia,
 - a. *the word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe*"
 3. Christ in all creation declares again that God claims us always as God's beloved children. ---
 4. When I am feeling overwhelmed by the competing voices of the world, I have found a prayer that can be repeated again and again.
 - a. It is the greeting Paul uses to begin three of his letters, one of which we heard today in Colossians.
 - b. It is simple, "*Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.*"
 - a. A simple sentence such as this can be held in our thoughts as a way of listening to a different voice than those that would overwhelm us,
 - b. a way of praying constantly.

III. Declaring God's Works

- A. The story of the Gerasene demoniac, like the story of the calming of the sea, like so many of the other stories about Jesus' ministry, -----
1. these all are ways of saying that the powers of the big mysterious world out there, regardless of how we name them, or organize them in our minds,
 - a. regardless of how real they are, and regardless of how awful they are –
 - b. none of them is ultimately powerful, none of them has or will have the last word, none of them will prevail, ultimately.
 - c. In the end, when all is said and done, we are encompassed within God's love.
 - d. In all things this will sustain us, even at our death.
 - e. And the power that Jesus brings, the power of love, the power we see most clearly on the cross,
 - (1. that power will prevail. And this victory over the powers is ours by grace, by gift.

- B. At the end of the story the cured man, restored to his right mind begs to follow Jesus.
1. Little wonder that he didn't want to stay around where he had been a tormented outcast.
 - a. But instead of saying, "*Follow me,*"
 - b. this time, Jesus commands the man to stay, and "*declare how much God has done for you.*"
 2. Jesus is giving responsibility and authority to effect change in the community.
 - a. What the man's community needed was the living testimony of the one who had been healed and restored.
 - b. With him present, they must reckon with God's determined action for health and life.
 3. It may surprise us that the healing of our communities is inextricably linked to our own healing –
 - a. as one lost self, - found and restored – leads others to discover anew their own identities and possibilities.
 4. One of the fruits of the faith in Christ that Paul notes in the Christians of Colossae is hope.
 - a. What a gift that could be for our communities and world today.
 - b. May we find our peace in the grace of God and let our light shine for all the world to see.