

Jesus has (according to Luke's gospel) just brought his friends safely across the "the lake" (Luke 8: 22) through a fierce storm.

Their fear has been conquered by Jesus presence, and his "command of the wind and the waves".

The last thing they need is trouble on land, but that is what they find.

Jesus steps ashore to a different kind of storm.

He is accosted by a madman:

naked; raving; a danger to himself and others

(according to the hurried biography Luke's gospel gives us).

This fellow has been banished to the edge of town.

Because of his condition, he is perpetually unclean.

He is forced to make do for himself among the tombs;

on the boundary between the living and the dead.

He is neither.

There is no medical, social, or personal response to this man except bondage and the watchfulness of those set to guard him

(more likely to keep him "where he belongs"). Luke's gospel does not recall his name.

Yet for all the energy spent to keep him apart,

he has broken his bonds, evaded his captors,

and like steel to a magnet he is drawn to Jesus.

From this distance, we are convinced that this is as it should be;

Jesus, whose mission it is to heal the sick and bring good news to the poor,

has already amazed us with his "way with the suffering".

From our Resurrection perspective,

we accept that Jesus purpose was that we might be free of all that binds us –

so this story would seem to hold no surprises for us.

Jesus confronts the demon – demons, actually –

bargains with them and casts them out of our unfortunate friend
at the expense of a herd of swine –

(no great loss, and great ritual significance to a Jewish audience,
but a crushing blow to the innocent swineherds)

and there you have it:

another triumph for this gracious and generous man of God.

But this is not a triumphant moment in Luke's gospel –

there is no heroes welcome – no joyful retelling of this miracle of liberation.

This is all about fear.

The key to this text comes when the people discover what Jesus has done.

The swineherds complain about the sudden loss of income, disguised as a miracle,
and when the crowds come to investigate,

they find the village villain “clothed and in his right mind.

And they were AFRAID!

Fear bound this man and kept him nameless.

Fear chased him to the tombs to live among the dead.

Fear kept his jailers from getting to know him, or from daring to consider him human.

Fear made an animal out of him, and kept him at bay.

Such are the demons that Jesus meets and casts out;

demons that have been assigned to one person;

projected on his condition/behaviour by a community gripped by fear.

That same community strips him of his humanity, and declares their fears banished,

But they are hiding behind their cruelty – they have committed the worst kind of crime.

Fear is at the heart of this.

Their fear generates the companion sins of ignorance and oppression.

Fear of something different led to an imprisonment.

Fear of a life now changed – radically changed –

and thus unpredictable and uncontrollable,
brings their attention to the man who upset the applecart...
and so they turn their fear on Jesus next;
the fear of one who refused to bow to the cultural expectation
and treat this man as less than human –
this fear brings them to show Jesus the quickest way out of town.
This is a common reaction in human beings –
the impulse to ignore the obviously odd, and shun those whom we do not understand.
The dividing line is easily moved –
be it race, religion, gender, or sexual orientation –
there is no end to the things that generate uncertainty in us,
and uncertainty too quickly turns to fear.
So the fear returns and Jesus leaves, and we are left with this remarkable story,
and an un-named evangelist, now set loose on the community that once imprisoned him
to tell of the things God has done for him.
The miracle in this story is left for us to discover.

Can we not imagine ourselves bound by this same kind of fear?
Fear of the strange or the unknown –
fear of the “madman in our midst”,
whom we are quick to identify, but reluctant to call by name...
Are not we guilty of letting our fear bind the weak and strange among us?
Does our fear keep us from recognizing the work of God even in this “enlightened age”?
Those who talk, or look or think differently
do not fit easily into our tightly controlled communities of faith.
We test and we judge, and in the process we lose sight of the possibility
that these strangers may have had something to tell us/show us
of the grace, mercy and love of God.

We don't even think to learn their names –

they are different, thus dangerous,

and we think ourselves well rid of them.

But the lesson – the miracle – that Luke's gospel offers us

Is not that Jesus "cured" a madman,

but that the cure is so simple, and so easily within our abilities.

To offer compassion – to face the stranger and call them friend –

to touch the untouchable and offer the hand of friendship to the outcast;

Jesus does all these things, and invites those who would follow him to do the same.

To recognize the human being in the one being shunned, or persecuted –

that is what Jesus does in the name of God,

and we who are part of God's covenant family must do the same.

This seems simple, but experience tells us it is hard; hard to face our fear –

hard to imagine that "they" are just like us.

Jesus saw only the man – Jesus is drawn, not to his madness, but by his humanity.

Jesus is quick to recognize the child of God in everyone he meets;

This attitude is central to his teaching, and affects his every action.

Our exiled man "at the tombs" discovered this to be true,

And his new knowledge turned him into an ambassador of God's Kingdom of grace.

No name – no home – but a new sense of himself;

A miracle has changed him;

and all because Jesus recognized him as one of God's own.

Think of what might be accomplished –

in the church; in the world – for the kingdom of God,

if we were to turn our hand to that kind of miracle.