

It’s not the negotiation between Jesus and the demons that is the most astonishing thing about our gospel reading – though that is incredible. To read just the exchange between Jesus and ‘Legion’ is a strange bit of Spiritual theatre, if I’m being honest. No, the strangest thing about this morning’s gospel is what happens between Jesus and the man who has been made well and whole.

Jesus has seen this man at his worst – raving and naked; living among the tombs; an outcast in every way. And Jesus (after this odd negotiation) sends the spirits packing – to the dismay of the swineherds. And when all is said and done, the town comes to see what has happened.

They meet a man who is suddenly in his right mind – and they are still afraid – perhaps more afraid than before. They had a solution for a raving madman (chain him up and keep him isolated – the fear is safely contained) but for this fellow whose life had been radically changed, they had no solution. This is a miracle, for sure, but the community is not impressed.

The ‘former madman’ senses this. His home is not a safe place. When he needed help, his fellow citizens imprisoned him. Now that he’s ‘cured,’ they are afraid of him. What chance does he have at a normal life?

“Let me go with you, Jesus!” (the text says he begged to be with Jesus) and you might imagine that Jesus, being Jesus, would have compassion on this poor unfortunate fellow, and add him to the throng of misfits that made up the crowd of disciples...

Jesus, however, says no.

Jesus sent him away, saying, ‘Return to your home, and declare how much God has done for you.’ Go back into the midst of your frightened, unsafe community and tell them about your encounter with God’s mercy and grace. You stay here – there’s work to be done.

It’s not a comforting story once you get down to it.

Sure, a man has been made well – he has his life back, but the neighbourhood is not sure what to make of him. The same folks who chained him up are still afraid – maybe he’ll have a relapse – maybe his cure is only temporary – maybe it’s a trick. And Jesus leaves him behind as a witness to God’s goodness and power - perhaps the only witness in town. A strange and challenging circumstance, but the story must be told, says Jesus, and you’re the one to tell it.

The history of faithfulness is a history of folks who are called to tell God’s story in potentially hostile places or under less-than-ideal circumstances. Abram is compelled to leave his homeland. Moses goes back to Egypt – where his life may be in danger. Joseph is sold, then jailed. Various prophets are mocked and persecuted. Poor Elijah wins a battle with the prophets of Baal, then is chased from the scene by the wrath of the queen. The call to share God’s story is not for the faint of heart.

Elijah brings this injustice to God’s attention (after being on the run for the requisite 40 days) God sees to Elijah’s need along the way (eat – rest – etc) then meets Elijah with the best question in Scripture: ‘what are you doing HERE?’

The question presumes that Elijah should be somewhere else – he had a job to do, after all. He was anointed – a prophet of the Most High. And Elijah offers his complaint – completely legitimate (I did my job, and now they want to kill me!) and God’s solution is...challenging.

Get up and go – there’s work to be done. Anoint kings. Train your successor. Don’t assume that your struggles somehow mark the end of God’s ability to act.

Why do these stories matter to us? Well, the church has been singing Elijah’s song for decades. ‘We used to matter – no one cares – we’ve been faithful and it doesn’t seem to matter. What’s the point!’

Or, like the man from the Gerasene, we see in Jesus a friend – someone in whose presence we’ll be safe and welcome. And Jesus says ‘stay put – there’s work to be done.’ Stay among those who don’t understand – speak to those who are suspicious of you – work it out. Share your story. Figure out how to understand

*“There’s work that needs doing...”*

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one another. This friendly Jesus has left us among strangers – in a world full of difficult conversations and potentially hostile relationships, Jesus says to us ‘You’ve got this – see you later.’”

There’s work to be done. Yes, we’ve heard the Gospel and yes, we trust in the promise -and sure, there’s a better life waiting, but in the meantime, there’s work to be done.

Social problems plague us and social services can’t keep up with the demand. People who have been long ignored or abandoned by ‘the system’ assume certain things about the usefulness of the church. We have been faithful and diligent, but the old habits aren’t winning friends to the faith – quite the opposite, in fact – and we’re not sure we can reinvent ourselves again. ‘Come on God – do something – we’re at the end of our rope, and we really need you to do something...’”

And that silence may be God’s answer – the patient parent reminding us that we have work to do – stories to tell – the next wave of witnesses to prepare and train.

The church has a never-ending job; to look continually ahead – to bring compassion to life in the present – to use the stories of our past to inform the work for the future. Time will eventually run out on the project, but not yet – not now.

Our frustration with our seeming lack of progress is not the deciding factor. Our desire to be ‘safe in the arms of Jesus’ does not give us permission to ignore the world around us. The hymn that reminds us “God’s grace has brought us safe thus far, and Grace will lead us home” does not set a timeline for that homecoming. It is meant to encourage us to keep at it – to tell of God’s wonders – to share those stories of grace and life renewed that arise from our own experience of God.