

Scary story

By [Debbie Blue](#)

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This passage has all the elements of a scary story. Jesus and the disciples get into a boat and a horrible storm comes up. The disciples scream that they are going to die, reach the shore, step out onto land—and find themselves in a graveyard where a naked demon-possessed man is wandering about. I imagine hissing and whispering and Linda Blair, but maybe I've seen too many movies. As a kid I used to lie in bed at night trying hard to remember exactly what my Sunday school teacher said: If I had Jesus in my heart, the demons couldn't possess me—but what if I doubted?

In this story the demons seem nothing at all like those I used to imagine. For one thing, Jesus speaks to them in a polite manner (James Alison says he is “courteous and gentle”), and never seems to have a very hard time with them. They know him—he says some words and they leave. The more frightening forces of death in Luke's story are the religious authorities, the Roman Empire, the crowd in the end, the forces that conspire in his murder.

Karl Barth refers to this story as “burlesque” and “farcical,” suggesting that the demons more ridiculous than frightening, a herd of squealing pigs in a panic. Perhaps this story undermines the conventional understanding of demons (even the typical understanding of Jesus' day) in order to reveal a different layer of evil.

Rene Girard's reading of the text is interesting in this regard (see the 6th chapter of James Alison's *Faith Beyond Resentment* or [“Girardian reflections on the Lectionary”](#)). The Gerasenes needed this man, an agreed-upon “bad guy,” to represent evil—he was someone *out there*, someone the social structure could cast out. This is how the system of the world maintains order; the community is unified by defining itself over against an other. In this case, the Gerasenes seize and bind the demoniac, but he keeps getting loose. This is actually convenient—perhaps the chains are purposefully made weak because the Gerasenes need his escape and recapture to maintain the

system. Girard suggests that there is collusion between the Gerasenes and their demoniac; the demoniac becomes the repository for the community's perversity, bearing the pathology of the system.

Jesus acts to humanize "the bad guy." He rebukes the legions—the myriad voices of the social order—and restores the man to his right mind. The man is peaceful and free, but this scares the people of the town deeply because it messes with their order. Of course the man would like to stay with Jesus, but Jesus says, no, go home to show the city how its order collapses in the face of the gospel, the word of God. What an assignment!

Barth says demon possession is the "supremely visible and audible and palpable dominion of nothingness over [humanity]." Do we operate according to some hidden social mechanism of expulsion? Are our actions controlled by The Empire, Money and Power, The Economy? We may be more possessed than we know.

Jesus comes to scoop us up *out* of the death-dealing, death-making systems we create to maintain our righteousness or our security, and *into* the love of God.