

June 23, Ordinary 12C (Luke 8:26-39)

Sometimes the terror we know is more tolerable than the peace we can't imagine.

by [Evan D. Garner](#) in the [June 5, 2019](#) issue

Has a naked person ever walked into your church? One Sunday morning, in the park across from our church's front door, a man sat on a bench completely unclothed. Nervously, the ushers asked my boss what they should do about it, and he replied, "Nothing—unless he crosses the street. If he does, don't let him come inside!" Although apparently set free from the "curse" of our first parents, a man who displays such freedom was not welcome in a dignified place of worship.

In Luke 8, we read about a naked man who has plagued the people of Gerasa with his unruly behavior. Although the townspeople have tried to lock up the demon-possessed man "with chains and shackles," he has always been able to overpower them. Unable to restrain him yet unwilling to submit to a demonic force they cannot control, the Gerasenes have managed to push him away to the place where they feel that he belongs—on the very edge of society, amidst the tombs, out of sight, out of mind, as good as dead. They have not solved the problem, but they have succeeded in brushing it far enough aside to establish an uncertain peace.

When Jesus arrives, this precarious balance is upset. Confronted by the presence of the Holy One, the demon-possessed man falls at Jesus' feet and cries out, identifying the rabbi in ways no ordinary human has yet discerned: "What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God?" Jesus demands the demons' name, claiming authority over the Legion yet granting the evil spirits' request to enter a herd of pigs. The pigs rush down the bank and drown, symbolically returning the spirits to their primordial realm—the realm over which Jesus has just asserted his power in the stilling of the storm (8:22-25).

But instead of restoring order to the region, Jesus' actions bring chaos. Understandably upset, the swineherds run into the city to share news of their economic loss. And when the townspeople see the wild one sitting in his right mind,

those who have long suffered his terrors are filled with a new sort of fear. The pig farmers explain to the crowd how the healing has taken place, and the people collectively ask Jesus to leave.

Having managed to compartmentalize the unearthly forces within the man, the residents recognize that they have come upon an even greater force over which they will have no control. So they beg the Son of the Most High to go away. Sometimes the terror we know is more tolerable than the peace we cannot imagine.

On closer examination, at least one detail in both Mark's and Luke's telling of the story seems out of place. Jesus could not have arrived in a boat on the shore of the Gerasenes, because Gerasa was 30 miles inland. To correct this, Matthew's version relocates the exorcism to the area of the Gadarenes, another city of the Decapolis about 25 miles closer to the seaside, but still, the distance between town and shore is puzzling. Some manuscripts of Luke 8 record the location as Gergesa, an unknown but presumably seaside community, which may reflect an attempt to invent a plausible location for this episode.

But what if Luke knew what he was doing? Following Mark's example, Luke may have identified this exorcism over Legion as a Gerasene miracle in order to help his readers make a clearer connection between demonic powers and the forces of evil that have their origins in the human world.

According to the historian Josephus, in AD 66 the Roman army brutalized the people of Gerasa as part of its campaign against the Jewish rebels during the First Jewish-Roman War. A legendary Roman legion of 5,000 soldiers would have been overkill, but a smaller cohort may have been responsible for the Gerasene slaughter. Regardless, Luke's readers must have recognized what the demons' name represented, making the association between demonic possession and brutal military occupation. In the exorcism, Jesus reveals his power not only over the demons who belong in the sea but also over the empires of this world.

In one sense, however, the connection with Rome makes this Gospel story even more troubling for the reader. After Jesus breaks the bonds of oppression, the townspeople ask him to leave—revealing a preference for the shackles of empire over the freedom of God's reign. That politically expedient choice is reminiscent of how God's people have behaved in the past. As the prophet Isaiah proclaims, God has extended God's hands to a rebellious people who, in return, have provoked God

to anger by refusing to call on the divine name, dwelling amidst the tombs, and eating abominable things like swine's flesh (65:1-9). The people of Gerasa remind us that those who reject God's salvation and choose allegiance with the nations and gods of this world are smoke in the Lord's nostrils, ready to be sneezed away.

We too live between the tyrannical powers of this world and the freedom of God's imminent reign. Accepting the freedom that Jesus brings us will cost us our place in the empire and the security that it provides. Confronted with that choice, we are tempted to push Jesus away, to ask him to take his revolutionary actions elsewhere. We are tempted to maintain our allegiance to the lesser powers that threaten us rather than embrace the overwhelming power that liberates us. But when we do this, we side with oppression. The Gerasene exorcism forces us to ask whether we are the ones using shackles and chains to imprison those whose freedom threatens us.