

Jesus Confronts the Powers of Legion - Part 2

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- [0 : 00] So, will you pray with me? God of heaven and earth, we enter into this space, into a moment of silence, asking that we might hear your voice and your voice alone.
- Lord, we come from weeks and days of busyness, of interruption, of disruption, of need, of joys, of hopes, into this space waiting and desiring.
- Lord, I pray that you would give us good and noble hearts to receive your word. I pray that in this place, you would help us to become more like you, but also, Lord, to become more fully human, more attuned to how the spirit is at work in this world and in the city and in our neighborhoods.
- Thank you so much for what you are doing and what you long to do. In Jesus' name, amen. All right.
- So, I'll start by saying that by this point, many of you know that I was a high school literature and composition teacher for a long time.
- [1 : 58] I taught the classes that are commonly called English, even though I've never been somebody that really cared deeply about the finer points of grammar.
- I'm the kind of person who loves words, who loves the architecture of sentences, who loves the imaginative power of stories.
- I was that kid who, growing up, I would spend, particularly in middle and high school, I would spend the entire day in the summers reading.
- The thicker the book, the better. And that's from where I come. So, English teacher was kind of the perfect fit for me. My first year of teaching, I reached for this book called *The Bluest*.
- We were coming into the home stretch of the third grading period. If you're a teacher, you know there's a lot of hope in that time of year. So, I was really excited to teach something that I felt could really be impactful for my students.
- [3 : 08] It was optional for the curriculum, but I felt like... Is my mic okay? Okay. It was optional for the curriculum, but I thought it would be really good in terms of teaching the history of the particular time period my students were moving through.
- This book, *The Bluest Eyes*, is about this little girl named Pakola Breedlove, who is destroyed by her desire for blue eyes.
- It's brilliant. It's a brilliant book. It's a tragic book. She's destroyed by what the world tells her that she should be, but that she could never actually become.
- She, along with her community, is possessed by an idea, a force that tells her what beauty is, and then that force ultimately tears her apart.
- Now, y'all know that Toni Morrison is a brilliant writer, so the way that she demonstrates the breakdown in this community is by using samples from a book, a series of books some of you might have used.

[4 : 18] They were in my house when I was growing up, the Dick and Jane series of books. They're the C. Jane Run kind of books. These books were used to help children read, and they later came under fire because they only centered the values of kind of middle-class white Americans.

The technique that they used to teach people to read, to teach kids to read wasn't great, but everybody used these books, and so Toni Morrison uses these as an example of breakdown.

So hopefully you can see this. The very first page of the books looks something like this. Here is the house. It is green and white.

It has a red door. It is very pretty. Here is the family. Mother, father, Dick, and Jane live in the green and white house. They are very happy.

See, Jane, she has a red dress. And then as she goes on, Morrison repeats that pattern, that phrasing at the beginning of the book and throughout the book.

[5 : 23] So the punctuation of those phrases get closer together. The capitalization breaks down. The punctuation breaks down. And so what the reader encounters is complete distortion.

It's really hard to make out what is written. Pecola, this little girl, confronts madness, and the community confronts collapse because of an idea from the outside that comes in and possesses and generates violence.

Now, last week, Pastor Anthony, he preached this sermon from Mark 5, 1 through 20. Hopefully you all saw that it was a great sermon.

And we agreed that we would try something different or something that at least he and I haven't tried before, which is preaching on the same passage but from different directions or at least partially from different directions.

So that's what we're going to do. I'm going to preach from the same passage. I'm going to add to some of Pastor Anthony's points. I'm going to take some other things in completely different directions. And I will say, if this is important, if you did not see that, today I'm not going to talk a lot about the spirituality of kind of demons.

[6 : 45] It's probably the actual spirituality of demons. So if that interests you, if you're all into that, check out his message, okay? Definitely would have recommended that. Yet, even as certain parts of that story I'm not going to talk about, I still feel this deep passion for the story.

It's often summed up, and you might see this in some of your Bibles at home, as Jesus heals the garrison demoniac. The story deeply affects how I think about really all of my faith and all of my entire life.

So, we're going to look at that today. Now, when I was interviewing to become a pastor of this church, I heard over and over again that many of the people in this community were doing the work of deconstructing and reconstructing their faith on healthier foundations.

And I was excited about that. I really resonate with that need and that project of somebody who came from very specific faith upbringing in Black Baptist churches and I've changed a lot theologically.

And that's been really good for me. But I also wondered about how people would feel about something I see as the increasing need in the Western church.

[8 : 10] the need to assume that the work of decolonizing is also a part of the work of deconstructing. Here's what Caitlin B. Curtis, an indigenous Christian writer from the Pottawatomie tribe, says about this.

She's written a brilliant book called *Native*. She writes, often deconstruction within the church ends up being very individualistic. What does it look like to deconstruct and reconstruct as a people, as kin, to take on the work of creating a post-colonial church for the sake of all of us, for the sake of the oppressed, for the sake of the earth?

Is it possible? As Christians? As Americans? The work of decolonizing, I'm convinced is the further communal work of deconstructing.

And that's what I want to talk about today. Now, I recognize when I talk about this word, when I use this word, it can be a little bit off-putting. So, I'm going to give a basic definition.

I'm not an academic of how I think about this idea and then we'll talk about how this shows up in scripture and why it's important. So, basically, I think of it as any force that comes on the community from outside without its consent and then takes it over.

[9 : 38] In the story, it's a literal, it's an actual demon. But we think about what are the things that come from outside and possess us. It's rooted in violence.

It generates violence over and over again. It comes in these multiple forms. And when you blow it up and think about it on its largest historic levels, think about things like exploitative colonialism, the ways that African peoples were removed from their lands in order to exploit those lands.

They were exploited for their labor and then the raw materials in their lands were mined and taken. You can think of it as settler colonialism. Think about the Native people, Native Americans, indigenous people, here and really all over, who were subjected to genocide and forced removal so that people could settle on their land and live.

You can think about this as the colonization of the mind. Maybe for many of us in this room that feels like the most approachable way to think about this. That's a term that comes from Franz Fanon.

And when you think about that, think about Pecola Breedlove, the little girl I mentioned at the beginning of the story, who is subject to this idea that comes out of culture that possesses her sense of self and then destroys her.

[11 : 01] At the end of the day, decolonizing faith means that we have to identify the destructive forces of empire, the destructive forces that come in from the outside and do violence.

And then we have to work through as people of faith what it means to institute systems of repair. We have to work hard so that people can repossess their land, their labor, their traditions, their bodies, their minds.

And where that isn't possible, we have to think about things like how do we make reparation? Now, as I talk about this, y'all, I am super aware that some of, like really aware, okay, that some of this might seem a little bit radical.

but let me assure you, and we can talk about this after the service or during the week, that these concepts are all very, very much deeply embedded in scripture. Ideas like restoration, restitution, and reparations, they're all there.

I love the Hebrew Bible. It's one of my favorite parts. I love the Hebrew Bible because you get these things so clearly. And I want to make note that every part of scripture, the scriptures that we take seriously, that shape and form our lives, every part, every word was either written under and impacted by either one of six empires.

[12 : 32] The Egyptian Empire, the Assyrian Empire, the Babylonian Empire, the Persian Empire, the Greek Empire, the Roman Empire.

I hope I, did I name six? I named six. Somebody was keeping up, right? That's six, okay. So to talk about decolonizing is to talk about these real social and theological realities that the writers of the Bible were confronting and thinking about as they created theology, as they thought about who God was in the world and what it meant to live morally and ethically on the earth.

So the story in Mark 5, 1 through 20, for me, as I think about the largeness of all of this, for me, this story is kind of an epicenter of hope.

It's an epicenter of hope amid all of these realities that to me often feel overwhelming. So I'm going to ask you to take out whatever, if you have a Bible, I love how I assumed probably not a Bible, okay, your device, your Bible, and turn to this, Mark 5, 1 through 20, Mark 5, 1 through 20.

I'm going to say a number of specific things about the story that you'll want to kind of track with, and I am, I would recommend if you're listening to this later, that you also do the same thing, grab a Bible, grab something to pull this up on.

[14 : 05] So here's what this says. They came to the other side of the sea, to the country of the Gerasenes, and when he, Jesus, had stepped out of the boat, immediately a man out of the tombs with an unclean spirit met him.

He lived among the tombs, and no one could restrain him anymore, even with the chain. For he had been restrained with shackles and chains, but the chains he wrenched apart, and the shackles he broke in pieces, and no one had the strength to subdue him.

Night and day, among the tombs and on the mountains, he was always howling and bruising himself with stones.

When he saw Jesus from a distance, he ran and bowed down before him, and he shouted at the top of his voice, what have you to do with me, Jesus, son of the most high God?

I adjure you by God, do not torment me. Some of you might have a different translation there. That's a place that there's often some different wording, which I'll say something about. For he had said to him, come out of the man, you unclean spirit.

[15 : 27] Then Jesus asked him, what is your name? He replied, my name is Legion, for we are many. He begged him earnestly not to send him out of the country.

Now there, on the hillside, a great herd of swine was feeding, and the unclean spirits begged him, send us into the swine. Let us enter them. So he gave them permission, and the unclean spirits came out and entered the swine.

And the herd, numbering about 2,000, rushed down the bank into the sea, and were drowned in the sea. The swine herds ran off and told it in the city and in the country.

Then people came to see what it was that had happened. They came to Jesus and saw the demoniac sitting there clothed, and in his right mind, the very man who had had the legion and they were afraid.

Those who had seen what had happened to the demoniac and to the swine reported it. Then they began to beg Jesus to leave their neighborhood. As he was getting into the boat, the man who had been possessed by demons begged him that he might be with him.

[16 : 42] But Jesus refused and said to him, go home to your friends and tell them how much the Lord has done for you and what mercy he has shown you.

And he went away and began to proclaim unto the copolis how much Jesus had done for him. And everyone was amazed. So I want to do now two things this morning.

First, I want to move through five key things to notice about the story. I'm just going to go really, really fast through that because it's such a rich story and there's a lot to notice.

And then after that, I'm just going to give us some big picture takeaways about why this matters. Again, as we're doing that work of thinking about what it means to have our faith set on really, really healthy foundations and to do the work of deconstructing and decolonizing.

So the first thing to notice, number one, the man that confronts Jesus is possessed. He has been entered and taken over against his will. The story tells us that this man literally inhabits the places of death.

[17 : 50] Some of the translations say things like burial caves. This is where he lives. For the Jewish readers of this story, this would have been understood as an unclean place.

For the folks who are reading this who are Gentile and in the community that Mark is writing to, they would have understood these places as outside kind of the civilizing center of the world.

You want to be a part of civilization in that world view. And he's outside of all of that. He's outside utterly of human community and he's been taken over. If you look at this and you read this really slowly, especially verses three through five, it's a tragic and vivid description.

The number of times that the words chains and shackles are used is overwhelming. It's heart wrenching. And then look at how many times you get that word, the word chains and shackles, and you get a sense that it's very much a battle between slavery and freedom.

That this man is constantly fighting every day, day and night. And it's a battle to remain human. Look at the way he's described.

[19 : 02] He howls like a wild animal. He bruises himself with stones. Look about this. His world is circumscribed.

It's from beginning to end rooted in violence. It's rooted in forced entry. It's rooted in lack of control. And if you look at the verse that talks about torment, that can also be read as he asks Jesus not to torture him.

Think about that expectation. That's what comes out of this person. That's the understanding that all that possesses him and all that he is at this point, that's what he brings.

And then after that, I think one of the hardest parts of this story is that we don't even know his name. Right? He's so taken over and possessed that all you get is the name of what possesses him, while his own identity, his selfhood is totally erased.

All right, so number two. The story is loaded with military imagery. Legion, and I think Anthony mentioned this last week, is the Latin rendering for division of soldiers.

[20 : 19] depending on who you read, people say between 2,000 and 6,000 soldiers, so a large company of soldiers. The word in the passage that's translated heard is a word that's usually used for military recruits.

The wild boar was the symbol on the flag, which wild boar is a kind of pig. The symbol is the symbol on the flag of the 10th Roman legion that was stationed in Palestine.

Palestine. The pigs charge into the sea. This also has military connotations. And then finally, the pigs are drowned in the sea.

And for the first readers of this story, they would have heard Exodus 14 ringing loudly in their ears when the Hebrew slaves who escaped from Egypt make it across the Red Sea, and then the oppressive army of Pharaoh is drowned.

That's what they would have heard. Okay, number three. Gerasa, this place, the region of the Gerasenes, it doesn't make sense for the exact location of the story.

[21 : 25] The actual city that is mentioned here is about 30 miles inland from the seashore. So Jesus can't like step off the boat. That's not possible and have this encounter. The author of the mark is probably doing some symbolic crafting here.

Now, if you think about this and you're like symbolic crafting, we're doing a Bible class, at 1.30. Hopefully, some of you will be there. Okay, we can talk about some of this. So there's probably some symbolic crafting happening here.

And then another thing to note is that Gerasa was a place where there was a lot of rebellion. During the Roman War, people in that city had rebelled against, I'm sorry, during the Jewish War, people had rebelled against Roman rule, and that's what the city was partially known for.

So think about all of that. Number four, after the man's interaction with Jesus, he is described as clothed in his right mind. This is one of my favorite, favorite phrases in all of Scripture.

The man is healed. In effect, his interaction with Jesus brings ultimate wholeness. And then consider that the word devil means the opposite of this.

[22 : 33] Devil, diabolos in Greek, means to throw apart, to throw a sender. It's like this violent kind of tearing apart. And when this man encounters Jesus, the opposite of that happens.

There is wholeness. And for me, if that isn't good news, I don't know what is. And then number five, wholeness is provocative.

While the man begs to remain with Jesus, the people are afraid and ask Jesus to leave. Don't you love these stories where you get these dramatic like one group of people feels this way and another group of people has a totally different response to what Jesus does.

The status quo in this town is rock. Their sense of what is normal and who should have power is completely thrown off. And one of the things when I kind of enter this story imaginatively that I wonder is whether some of these folks sold pork to the local garrison.

I wonder if they were benefiting from things as they were. Like, in very concrete ways. I love the way the New Oxford Annotated Bible puts this.

[23 : 44] Perhaps the people were apprehensive that Jesus had disrupted their delicately balanced adjustment to alien possession. Okay, so you might be saying, oh, that's real interesting.

Some of you probably are saying, oh, that's not that interesting. But wherever you are, let's talk about some big picture things and what all of this or some of this might mean.

So first I would say as a church we are, as I say, called to this larger work of becoming anti-colonial and de-colonial decolonizing. By the way, I recognize I'm leading a group that's about to start a book about decolonizing.

That is coincidence. As I'm like, hmm, it is, yeah, yeah, I want to note that. All right, so when Jesus sets foot in this town in Gerasa, the legion, the force that comes from outside and takes him over bows down, like literally prostrates themselves before Jesus.

The legion, which is this force that throws apart, is a force that is the site in which Jesus brings healing and makes whole.

[24 : 59] Jesus is the one who disrupts the structural violence of empire. He disrupts the kinds of forces in our world that claim to bring civilization, that claim to bring peace, but actually generate violence and destruction.

And as a church, we've got to start talking about these things really well. And again, why? Because the biblical writers are deeply and constantly thinking about these ideas and writing from this space, creating oral tradition from this space about what it means to follow Jesus in the world, what it means to pursue God in the world.

And then, not only are we called to this work of decolonizing, but as a church, we're also called to the work of following Jesus the exorcist. Now, lots of things have to be said about this.

An uncomfortable truth for us as modern Christians is that over and over again in the Gospels, Jesus is exercising. He's not exercising, not like that, not like the Peloton, but Jesus is exorcising demons, right?

And that's an important reality. This story is actually the first of three stories in this chapter that are all about healing. So often inside of Jesus' work of healing is exorcism.

[26 : 30] And again, disclaimer, let me be clear here. I, many of us have been in a place where we have been taught things about how to cast out literal devils. We've been there, we've done that.

We don't want to go back. So I want to be clear that's not the path I'm taking. I will say that I might have said this before that I grew up back to Castor and it was the kind of thing that if we ordered a pizza it had to be delivered.

You know, like it was that kind of space. So I get you might not want to go there. But, but a gospel that predominantly talks about Jesus as savior is a gospel that can easily be co-opted by conquest.

A gospel that takes Jesus seriously as one who casts out as an exorcist, as one who places that work inside inside his work of healing, that gospel remembers that the good news is also about wholeness and healing, that the fruit of that good news is about the wholeness of human beings and human society.

The man is clothed and in his right mind. He is more himself. He is more human. He has more of an identity community because of his encounter with Jesus.

[27 : 56] And then, in addition to those two things, to decolonizing and getting serious about following Jesus, the exorcist, as a church, we also have to get good at naming the powers.

This is something that Anthony also did a great job of talking about last week. Think about this line, this simple phrase that Jesus asks, what is your name?

And what does Jesus get back? Legion, for we are many. How do we start as a community in Washington, D.C., to systemically name the many?

The many that bring violence, that throw apart, that tear apart? How do we start to do that? How do we identify the multiplicity of forces in our world and in our city that seek to dominate and devastate our neighbors and ourselves?

When I was an English teacher, I lived in Anacostia, which is east of the river, east of the Anacostia River, and I commuted about 15 miles to McLean.

[29 : 16] I'm going to tell you the truth. I walked into a school in need of a job in August, and they had an opening, and they hired me. I don't know, but it happened, and it was amazing. And every day that I made that commute, I was confronted so deeply with the income disparity in this area, right?

You could see it so clearly on that drive, and I would, in my mind, wrestle through, like, how is this possible? What is creating this? And I would really struggle because I would feel so overwhelmed.

Like, when I was in my own neighborhood, I would think about things like, oh, is this about, like, discriminatory housing policy? Okay, yeah, it's about that. Is this about the way in which we prosecute drug crimes and put particularly black men in prison?

Is it about that? Okay, it's about that. Is it about, and I would just go through these lists and just feel so overwhelmed. And it became really clear to me really quickly that naming the powers that identify the forces in this city, in this area, and in this country that tear apart, that's communal work.

Like, I, on those drives, I feel so hopeless. We have to be naming the powers in community and then discerning how to move forward as followers of Jesus.

[30 : 31] And then, finally, I think that this passage means that we are called to the work of journeying to the other side of the sea. So, the first sentence of this story, I haven't said much about, but it reads, they came to the other side of the sea.

Mark 5, 1 through 20, comes just after a story in which Jesus and his disciples are crossing the sea and they encounter a chaotic storm and the Jesus, this is the story in which Jesus sleeps through the storm and they're all freaking out.

How can you be sleeping through the storm? That's the story right before this. The other side of the sea, this region of the Gerasenes, this region of the Decapolis, the Ten Cities, would have been Gentile territory.

So, Jesus' disciples are moving across the sea into Gentile territory. The disciples are trying to cross into another way of life, life, but they struggle to make the passage.

They fear that they're going to drown. Now, today is the first Sunday of Black History Month, and it's also a Sunday that's going to mark our transition out of Mark and into the book of Exodus.

[31 : 55] We're going to start talking some about how Exodus is this foundational story informing a people that are able to move from slavery to freedom. But as I was thinking about that, y'all, I'm going to confess something on this stage.

I'm a little nervous, but as I thought about this sermon today, as I thought about moving into this next series, I realized that I'm a little bit afraid of the passage, that the crossing over that we as a community have to do.

When I was discerning whether or not to become a pastor in this community, I realized that one of my fears was that I would bring harm to the community, that my leadership would bring harm.

Basically, I wondered, I'm just going to talk real candidly here, I know this is being recorded, maybe I should have rethought that, but I wondered if white people would stay. I wondered if the things that I'm constantly thinking about, that black and brown people are constantly thinking about as we walk around the city, as we wrestle with how to live out our faith, I wondered if those things would be perceived as like, okay, you're talking about that because you're black, but not because you're Christian.

I wondered about whether those things would be considered niche, specialized, or this is kind of a side thing we can talk about a couple times a year. This is the kind of thing we invite people once or twice a year in to talk about for Black History Month, but we're good other than that.

[33 : 40] I was worried that that's how it would be perceived instead of being seen as these things being perceived as central to the gospel, of central to what we're doing here as a church in this city for all people, all the people that Jesus loves.

This text, it reminds us that we're called to the other, to the other side of the sea, to the other, whoever that is for us, even though that is so hard, making the passage is so hard.

Now, if you're black or brown, you live in a world where you're constantly crossing cultures, you're constantly making this passage, and that constant crossing, there's also work to do in that, to remember that the goal is not to become them, whoever the them is, but the goal is to become free.

We have to keep that in mind, but if you're not black or brown, this crossing also might seem super alien, but it's also a passage that leads to freedom, that leads to wholeness, that leads to joy.

So, friends, my friends, I hope, you are invited to the good news today, the news of Jesus that disrupts the violent forces of domination, the news that ends in wholeness in all of us being left clothed and in our right minds, the news that re- humanizes us and repairs literally and figuratively all that has been stolen.

[35 : 28] So, the only question left to ask is this. Behind all the words, behind how it may appear, what are you begging for?

So, in this story, that word beg comes up a bunch of times. The demons in the story are begging to enter the pigs.

The man begs to remain with Jesus. The townspeople beg Jesus to leave. So, what is your deepest desire as you encounter Jesus?

What is your deepest fantasy for this world? And does it align with God's fantasy for wholeness?

Amen. Amen.