

Epiphany 3
Lectionary 12-C

WFAGC – Jesus stills the storm (Mark 4:35-41)

At the confession, talk about how people used to come out of the water and be dressed in a new white gown. They would go in naked (almost) and come out dressed in the clothes of Christ.

Mark likes to put stories together so that they tell one story. Today we have two stories about storms. Let me tell the first story. Tell the story of Jesus stilling the storm. Some storms happen in nature, and some storms happen inside of people. Now we will hear the second storm story.

I wonder why Jesus wanted to go to the other side of the lake when it was already dark. I wonder how Jesus could sleep in the boat. I wonder how the disciples knew Jesus could help them.

Mark 5:1-20 - A legion of demons or the side effect is death.

There are thousands of little ways to compromise our faith, our witness, and our ministry.

If you've seen any old gladiator movies, you can't hear the word Legion without thinking of the Roman legions. The first people to hear this story couldn't either. If the demon is named Legion, then Rome is at the heart of what is wrong with the situation. Pigs also play a major part in the story, and the demons enter the pigs. Pigs were at the heart of the compromise people had to make with the Roman occupation. The soldiers and the whole government apparatus liked to eat meat, and they didn't have the Jewish dietary laws regulating their lives. Raising pigs was one way to get ahead economically in the Roman culture. After all, if you didn't raise them and make a living, then someone else would, and then how do you raise your family? If you resist Rome and keep yourself separate from the Roman ways, then you're subject to the chains and imprisonment. You risk being tossed out of society, a pariah, someone demon possessed. So something much more is going on in this story than a simple exorcism.

I think it is important to read this story in the broader context. If we focus on the exorcism, we get lost in the debate over what was really wrong with the man. I'm not sure it helps to focus on the diagnosis of the man, whether he had a mental illness like depression, schizophrenia, or something else. Then the debate degenerates into trying to discover if he should have been on prozac or one of the drugs we see advertized nightly, the ones with long disclaimers about possible side effects, one of which is death.

The reality is that one of the side effects is always death. Even in our story for today. Forget about the mental illness diagnosis, and see how this is a confrontation with evil, the forces of Satan, or however you are able to make sense of what is wrong with our world. There is something wrong, and we know that it goes deeper than simple medical diagnosis. It more complicated than one remedied by education alone. It goes deeper than asking people to control their will, to become enlightened. These things may be helpful on one level, but how does one deal with evil. Read the newspaper, watch the news stories, and often we hear about what we can conclude is evil. Evil resides in occupying forces, in oppressive regimes, in racial or

ethnic violence. What this story does is pull that evil back into our lives as we make the little compromises that look the other way, keep silent, or do nothing.

Jesus asks for the name of the evil, and the man gives the name. Jesus also asks us to name our demons, all the ways we make compromises with what we know to be wrong in our society. Materialism is an occupying army. The soldiers of consumerism are legion. Isolating individualism is a powerful force. Like Rome, which brought peace and prosperity to much of the land and wasn't evil in all respects, those forces are not evil in all respects. From our history books we know many of the good things Rome was known for. But there was a dark side. The pressure was on to conform to Rome and give ultimate allegiance to the emperor – or else. Compromise or be put in chains. The compromises didn't have to be big. A thousand little compromises would suffice.

It is those thousand little compromises that Jesus asks us to name. It is those little compromises that are locking us up and keeping us from living by faith and enjoying the peace and hope that trust brings.

Jesus calls us to know our demons and live in the fullness of faith in him. Everyone in the story was afraid of the demons, except Jesus. Jesus confronts evil. The side effects may include death, as indeed it does. Jesus would give his life in the confrontation with evil, but his death means life for us. Living in the confidence of faith is freedom.

On Wednesday nights we sing our prayers and one of the petitions is this: Sing "Heal us, Lord, and renew our lives. Come release us from our demons."

We're not always sure what those demons are, but we sense that the mystery of life includes the mystery of evil. That is what our story confronts.

Dispense with demon/mental illness debate.

Legion is the great evil for the people. Rome may have brought some good, but it was at a price that the people couldn't pay without losing their spiritual souls.

The great evil enters the pigs, the symbol of all the ways people compromise to the evil. The demons are legion in our lives also.

The gods of wealth, success, and progress bring just enough good things to mask the price to our souls. Materialism, consumerism, individualism are the compromising demons and take many forms.

We can name those demons, but we must give our name to the demons. My name is Fred, and the more I have the tighter I hang on to what is not mine.

So we pray, "Heal us, Lord, and renew our lives." Here God puts us back together. Here you are not alone, and you don't make it on your own. Here we discover the community of God, the family, the body of Christ. Here we are not judged by our possessions, or our successes at work or at school – or our failures. We are judged by the waters of baptism. Just the way you are, God loves you and claims you. Here we discover we have all we need. A little bread is enough to

feed us all. Here abundance is the rule and not scarcity. Peace and not anxiety, because we trust that God will care for us all week long.

Heal us, Lord, and renew our lives. Come release us from our demons, so that we can live in the freedom of your love.

Benediction: Galatians 3:26-28

In Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.

Mark 5:1-20

Reader: They came to the other side of the sea, to the country of the Gerasenes.
²And when Jesus had stepped out of the boat, immediately a man out of the tombs with an unclean spirit met him. ³He lived among the tombs; and no one could restrain him anymore, even with a chain; ⁴for he had often 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. ⁵Night and day among the tombs and on the mountains he was always howling and bruising himself with stones. ⁶When he saw Jesus from a distance, he ran and bowed down before him; ⁷and the man shouted at the top of his voice,

Man: "What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I beg you by God, do not torment me."

Reader: For Jesus had said to him,

Jesus: "Come out of the man, you unclean spirit!"

Reader: Then Jesus asked him,

Jesus: "What is your name?"

Man: "My name is Legion; for we are many."

Reader: The man begged Jesus earnestly not to send them out of the country. ¹¹Now there on the hillside a great herd of swine was feeding; ¹²and the unclean spirits begged him,

Man: "Send us into the swine; let us enter them."

Reader: So Jesus gave them permission. And the unclean spirits came out and entered the swine; and the herd, numbering about two thousand, rushed down the steep bank into the sea, and was drowned in the sea.

¹⁴The swineherds ran off and told it in the city and in the country. Then people came to see what it was that had happened. ¹⁵They 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. ¹⁶Those who had seen what had happened to the demoniac and to the swine reported it. ¹⁷Then they began to beg Jesus to leave their neighborhood. ¹⁸As he was getting into the boat, the man who had been possessed by demons begged Jesus that he might be with him. ¹⁹But Jesus refused, and said to him,

Jesus: "Go home to your friends, and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and what mercy he has shown you."

Reader: And he went away and began to proclaim in the Decapolis how much Jesus had done for him; and everyone was amazed.