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Luke 8:26-39  
Extraordinary Stories

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be reflections of your word to us in Christ Jesus.

I was teaching a year-long confirmation class with a group of grade 7 & 8 youth. One Sunday morning in a conversation about scripture, I asked them to go around the circle and share with the group their favourite passage. We had some lovely heart-warming texts, some poignant ones and then one kid read this morning's gospel and the kids went nuts. "This is a story in the Bible??" "Whaaaat??" "That's so crazy, man, what? The pigs just ran off the cliff??" They were hooked! That's the key to teenagers – tell them something outrageous and you'll have a great conversation.

The story left them with so many questions: why did Jesus do that? Why would the pigs run into the water? Why would the people ask him to leave? Why wouldn't Jesus ask the man to follow him? The story drew them in and engaged them; they knew there's something about this story. They're right; it is an extraordinary story.

In the scene before this in Luke, Jesus says to his disciples, let us go to the other side of the Sea of Galilee. On the way Jesus sleeps as a storm brews and lifts up the sea around them. The disciples panic, wake Jesus, and Jesus calms the storm. When they reach the other side they are in gentile territory, that is, non-Jewish territory – it's the only time in Luke's gospel they do this. These people are "other," they are not going to see eye to eye with Jesus and the disciples on things that are simply given in Jewish culture. But some things are the same. The people on the other side of the sea are neighbours: equally human, equally broken, equally in need of good news.

The text severely contrasts those who have been overcome by the stuff of life and those who are making life work for them. The Gerasene Demonic, as he is known, is a man who has somehow lost hold of himself. His vulnerabilities were numerous; if we think about the stuff of our own lives, we can

imagine how the compounding of vulnerabilities could leave one altered in this way. Whatever the circumstances – illness, injury, family of origin, lack of opportunity, addiction, all of the above – whatever the context of his brokenness, it has overtaken him and for years he has been in full on breakdown. And he is not the only one. Though the text doesn't mention it, he is not alone living in the tombs, amongst those being prepared for burial. They're all outcast from society. Jesus is good news to them.

In contrast, the swineherds (those tending the pigs) and those deeply invested in the economics of the region take the same message of Jesus and ask him to leave. Jesus is turning their world upside down but in a really different way. Like on the other side of the sea, those who find Jesus the most challenging are the people with power and status. They resist; they become frightened; they become angry . . . they are not ready to receive what Jesus has to offer. There is a prayer in the Roman Catholic liturgy just before people go forward to receive communion that says: Lord, I am not worthy to receive you, but only say the word and I shall be healed. The word “worthy” I learned recently can be better translated, “ready” . . . Lord, I am not “ready” to receive you, but only say the word and I shall be healed. Now that is some truth. It seems like readiness comes in stages, in layers; with each layer, Jesus heals us.

The newly healed man is ready; he's ready for it all; he's ready to jump in with two feet, but another surprising thing happens. Jesus tells him he can't come along. He doesn't need to be with Jesus to fulfill his call, because he has a story to tell. His job is to stay there and help prepare the people for the message of Jesus; “help prepare them to be healed by telling your story.”

This is a great story. Without knowing anything about it, the story grabs us. As you learn about it, the power of the story grows . . . there's an additional question: why is this story being told in this way? Legion has another meaning . . . a Roman legion was a battle force of 4-6 thousand soldiers.<sup>1</sup> If you follow the metaphor, Jesus allows the Roman legion to enter the swine, which are unclean to the Jews -

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<sup>1</sup> Harper Collins Study Bible. Note on Luke 8:30 p. 1779.

so they're going to think that's perfectly appropriate - and this is the interesting part: it was thought during that time that the demonic could not survive in water . . . never mind that Jesus had just demonstrated in calming the storm that even the waters obey him. Metaphorically Jesus takes the Roman army and obliterates them from the face of the earth . . . and saves those who are suffering at their hand. The 14<sup>th</sup> Century Christian mystic, Julian of Norwich saw in a vision the redemption of Christ juxtaposed against the devil's destructive power, and she "laughed greatly," for she saw that in the end the "fiend" would not prevail. Every wound and sorrow inflicted by wickedness would, in Christ, become a source of honour and glory as it was healed.<sup>2</sup> And salvation is holistic, not isolated, so as the man experiences the darkness leaving his body, he also experiences healing for the numerous things that led to that state in the first place. It effects his appearance, his ability to think, his speech, his sense of self. As I've been tending our garden this year, I go through periodically and cut off the dead and struggling leaves and branches so that the plant will stop putting energy into what is unhealthy. When those things are pruned away, it has more energy to put toward growing a healthy plant . . . a healthy self.

If you continue to look on this level, gospel message is really contained in this one story; the people of his day really wanted to see the Romans fall and wanted Jesus to be the source of their undoing. But it was never going to happen with Jesus striking down armies. It was always going to be personal connection; personal healing; opportunity to follow Jesus or helping others become ready for healing. It was always going to be about teaching people how to experience the kingdom of God, how to see the world in a different way, and then let them teach someone else and tell their own extraordinary story.

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<sup>2</sup> Julian of Norwich Showings, in *Feasting on the Word* year C, vol 3, p. 170.