

## When Jesus Comes to Town

Luke 8:26-39

At night, you could hear him howl, his plaintive wail riding the evening breezes. He was possessed, they said, he lived amidst death, in the cemetery outside of town, that town on the far side of the lake. As parents would hear him howl, they would press their children a little closer to their sides, warn the children to stay away from him, as if such a warning were really necessary, and surmise again that those in their graves were better off than the one who lived his pitiful life among them.

Oh, there had been a time when people had used him for sport, chaining him up, then gawking as he scurried to and fro, but he always broke the chains and after a while the entertainment

value diminished markedly. Now, they just left him alone, scarcely gave him a thought, except when those haunting howls hovering in the wind shivered their comfort and ease. And left this dead man walking to live his living death among the dead and buried.

Then, one day a new man comes to town. His name is Jesus. It is difficult to think of two men more dissimilar: the one a raving naked man who screamed in the night; the other a peaceful, thoughtful, wandering teacher. But in his own way, Jesus is even more disturbing than that man howling among the tombs.

Why is this Jesus so disturbing? Because when Jesus comes to town, he proclaims that life can be different, that God has opens new doors and invites people to a new life... and when Jesus

comes to town, suddenly you realize you sort of like the way things are, after all. Because when you listened to the mad man raving amidst the tombs and rattling his chains in the night air, well, that was too bad, but there again, there was the dull complacency that well, life is sometimes like that and at least that's not me. The demon-possessed man rattled his chains against the tombs. When Jesus comes to town, he unsettles us. He rattles our hearts.

And suddenly we have to decide again. Do we invite Jesus to stay or do we invite Jesus to leave? What is the cost of the new life Jesus offers?

Now, we modern people are perhaps disturbed by the idea of demon possession. We are not comfortable with the idea of

legions of evil critters possessing someone, convulsing someone, and negotiating with Jesus whether they are to be sent to the abyss or sent into a herd of pigs. My inclination is to focus on a deeper symbolic meaning of this story.

Because even today we certainly see cases where people are living lives of living death. It is no accident this man lived among the tombs. Addiction, abusive relationships, lives lived without a sense of hope or purpose, these are all living deaths, as are despair, poverty, depression.

In any case, here what is going on: a man is living a God-forsaken sort of life, and he lives it in the context of the status quo. Who knows, maybe there had been a time when some kind soul had gone to the man living in the tombs, given him

some food or clothing, but then after while, he just sort of took off his clothes anyway, and so they chained him up for a while, but that didn't work, and so they just sort of left him go his own way, living among the tombs, and didn't give him a second thought, except during those nights when the wind was just right and his cries disturbed the serenity of the evening.

And one day, Jesus comes to town. Ironic, isn't it: the demons recognized Jesus as a man of power immediately. They meet him at the boat, residing as they do in this naked sort of man with chains flying all over the place. The demons recognize Jesus and his power and don't like it one bit, because they know if Jesus' power is unleashed, then the world will never be the same. Popular thought back then said the demons had their world and God his, but now, the demons realize that God has dominion

even over them. The old order of things can no longer stand, now that Jesus has come to town.

The townspeople don't know what to make of it all. Who is this man Jesus who would have anything to do with the naked man who lived among the tombs, in the city of the dead?

Who is this man indeed. When Jesus comes to town, he doesn't always stop at the house of the most prominent, the most righteous. Sometimes first, before he does anything else, he heals the least of the least, even this bedraggled, naked, haunted sort of man. And sometimes Jesus turns his back on the righteous leaders and embraces a woman caught in adultery and sometimes he invites himself to go to Zaccheus' house when that was the last place a religious man should go.

That's what is so unsettling about Jesus when he comes to town. He goes places and deals with folk we have long since written off. He stops by the trailers of unmarried moms and he goes to jails and he goes to girlie joints and he speaks to juvenile delinquents and offers acceptance and he offers new life. Jesus is the kind who sits beside Rosa Parks on a bus. Jesus is the kind who forgets the Bed and Breakfast and spends the night with a homeless guy under a bridge. Jesus is the kind of man who worries about where the poor will live as housing costs soar out of sight.

Jesus is the kind of man who brings transformation. And that is unsettling... Before I came to Ann Street, someone said "It's a good church, but a status-quo church. . .They want to keep things as they are." But I have found the truth to be different.

You are risking new programs, stepping out in faith to create new Sunday School Classes, creating a disaster response team. You have expressed your willingness to take an established, wonderful program such as the Wednesday Nighters and said, we will move that to another night, so that a new ministry, focused on the lost children and youth of this community, can begin.

You are a church that knows Jesus has come to town. And so we do not ask, what is best for me, but rather, what is best for the ministry of the church, as we understand it, led by the Spirit of Jesus Christ?

This is the kind of thinking that gladdens the heart of God himself. What we have to decide as a church is what that town

had to decide. When Jesus comes to town, what do we do with him?

Is he the kind of man we want staying in our village. Is he the kind of man we want living in our hearts? Is he the one we want running our church... our church? No, His church.

That town made a different decision than this church has made.

“Well, OK Jesus. You are talking with this man. That’s all right. It saves us the trouble and besides if he gets too close to us he might be dangerous.” And, you know what, I think the townspeople would even have settled for Jesus casting the demons out, if he had just cast them out into the lake or somewhere. ... they didn’t have a problem with his being healed.

But, when it was all said and done, they invited Jesus to leave.

Because, you see, having Jesus around cost them something.

The pig corporation and the United Pig Workers Union and the ham biscuit makers all agreed: the new life Jesus gave this man was nice, but it just cost too much. Look at all the pigs. Look at all the profits. Gone forever.

Luke tells us the people were afraid because they did not understand... but understand what? Understand that this Jesus who comes to give new life to the howling naked man living among the tombs offers new life to them as well. They invite Jesus to leave.

Jesus, we thank you for the new life you offered, but, well, it just

doesn't fit in with our town. Sure that guy can talk normally now and come to find out he had a family and now they're back together, but the pig industry really took a hit. It cost them big time when you came to town and next it might cost us.

And besides, it's just too disruptive. We've taught our kids that this demon-possessed man was not one of us; we've taught them to avoid him and others like him at all costs. But now what do we do? And, Jesus, you sort of made us feel uncomfortable that somehow if we had cared a little more for him that maybe we might have helped him long before now. But Jesus, we had just sort of gotten used to him the way he was. Now everything is just a jumble. The outcast is now our neighbor, and now other possessed folk might expect the same new life. And did we mention that when you are around it sort of makes us feel we

should live differently, think differently, act differently?

The 19<sup>th</sup> Century Scottish philosopher Thomas Carlyle described such an attitude, "If Jesus Christ were to come today, people would not even crucify him. They would ask him to dinner, and hear what he had to say, and make fun of it."

But I don't agree with him. I believe that we are a church that wants to fulfill its Christ-given mission, even if we have to do some things differently.

On this day Jesus comes to town, and they ask Jesus to leave. And Jesus left on a boat and went to another place. And the town returned to the way it had been. And yet not quite the same: for the man Jesus healed was still there. And from time to

time he would remind them of all Jesus had done for him. Probably that's why Jesus had told him to stay in town, in fact. His new life was a living witness to the power of Christ. And could it be that from time to time the townspeople would wonder how life might have been different for them, had they asked Jesus to stay. And may we be a church that always asks Jesus to stay among us , and unsettle us, and transform us. Amen.