

“Out of Chaos: Hope”

a sermon by

Rev. Katie Crowe

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Mark 5:1-20

Our scripture lesson for the afternoon comes from Mark 5:1-20 and is a part of Jesus' healing ministry - it is the story of the healing of a man plagued by a demon. This story takes place on the shore that Jesus and his disciples arrived at after they had weathered a tremendous storm that had threatened to capsize their boat, but that subsided at the sound of Jesus' voice.

"They came to the other side of the sea, to the country of the Gerasenes. And when he 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 any more, even with a chain; for 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. 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." For (Jesus) had said to him, "Come out of the man, you unclean spirit!" 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 them 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 two thousand, rushed down the steep bank into the sea, and were drowned in the sea.

The swineherds 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. 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 in the Decapolis how much Jesus had done for him; and everyone was amazed."

As I mentioned to you earlier, I had the honor of spending this past week on a mission trip with a small group from our church to the Gulf coast of Mississippi. We spent the week mucking out homes and tearing down moldy walls and insulation, and shoveling out piles and piles of people's muddied and destroyed personal possessions. We also spent the week hearing stories of the storm. Tales of the way Katrina rocked the coast, so many homes, and lives even still today. Stories of horror and tragedy, and stories of triumph. People and cars were left stranded in trees and on rooftops, entire homes carried blocks away from their foundations, and even the slightest amount of water on a living room floor staged a siege on a home as it became absorbed by drywall and began to rot and decay. But over the course of the week an interesting thing happened. Without discussing it with one another, a few members of our group, myself included, had begun to personify this hurricane in our minds. To one member, Katrina was like a person filled with wrath - a being that had a life force of its own - blowing destruction with a heart bent on drowning the masses with water or grief. Influencing survivors today with the memory of its terrible presence so that it never really had actually died. To me, when I heard the stories, the

storm had become a monster - living and breathing - roaring and raging across the shore and devouring everything in its path. Slipping in through loose window frames and under the crack of the door. Tearing into roofs with claws made of maple trees and driving a wedge between families and relationships by the power of some insidious evil spirit. Nothing could stop it. No levy could hold it back. No plywood could keep its shattering effects from leaving a scar. No evacuation plan could put enough miles between this storm and its power over people's lives. No amount of protection that anyone could build around themselves would suffice. But this storm was no malicious person and it was no monster. It certainly was no demon it was just ... water. In the ancient mind of the writers of Genesis and Exodus water meant chaos and I'd say that sums the whole situation up pretty well. It was just unrestrained chaos blown right into the middle of ordinary life.

An innocent man lived out his days tormented by demons among the tombs of the hillside. The chaos in his mind had left not just a scar but gaping wounds as he gashed his arms with rocks and went screaming into the night. Perhaps he had found his way there on his own, or perhaps out of their horror he had been driven there by a fearful people. Standing in stark contrast to the 10 illustrious cities along the rim of the Sea of Galilee that were filled with Greek culture and sophistication was this soul driven to live as an animal among the dead, howling and bruising himself with stones. And nothing could stop him. No amount of protection that anyone would build for themselves or for him would suffice, for in him was Legion. Our scripture says, "No one could restrain him any more, even with a chain; for 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." Unrestrained chaos going stark raving mad just outside the rhythms of ordinary life. Stashed away like an embarrassed secret - if he could only be locked up, they would have thrown away the key.

Then in walks Christ. Striding onto the scene just fresh from subduing another kind of chaos. A violent storm that had swept up from the sea and threatened to capsize his boat, his disciples, and himself until he'd stretched out his arm and rebuked the wind and the water - commanded the chaos to stop. And it did. And he'd said to his disciples, "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?" And they were left wondering in Mark 4:41, "Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?" Barely had his robes begun to dry before they arrive at the shore and he now stands before a man possessed by the confusion and decay of Legion, and he is acknowledged by them with the highest title that could be given, 'Son of the Most High God.' They alone know what power he is capable of. They alone know that he alone is capable of restraining the forces that are so out of the control of human hands that he alone can bring restoration where there is only the breakdown of civility and humanity that drives people mad and torments them in the core of their soul. He alone can bring order out of chaos and that, much to the disappointment of Legion, is exactly what he did. Drove this reckless, destructive and dehumanizing force from its home in the man and into a herd of pigs who, just moments before had been rooting for roots and worms, but in an instant were driven to race down the side of a hill to their death. With a voice that has the power to calm the seas, he also speaks a command to demons and they have to obey. And the people were afraid.

“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...then they began to beg Jesus to leave their neighborhood.” I could never understand this reaction of the people but I think that I am finally beginning to. For one, he had just killed 2,000 of their pigs. For another, how could they not fear this man who could curb and direct the most powerful forces of this world according to his will? Earlier in the book of Mark after Jesus performs an exorcism, the scribes came down from Jerusalem said, “he has Beelzebul, and by the ruler of the demons he casts out demons.”¹ Could this man be a more powerful demon himself? More powerful than Legion? The people had great reason to be afraid - if this man Jesus could cast out demons and calm storms, what does that mean for what he could do to us? What if that power turns on me, then where will I be? The people were not comfortable in the presence of Jesus because he also represented a power that seemed reckless, that they could not control, that clearly had great authority and was not theirs to tame. Nothing could stop him. No amount of protection the people could build around themselves would suffice. There was no promise of safety and they feared the prospect of chaos - the chaos of one who could reorder their lives with a word. They feared the demonstration of power that they did not understand but they also did not understand that when Christ showed up on the shore he brought with him the reign of a new order. And under his order out of chaos there would be hope.

In his work *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, C.S. Lewis writes of the experience of the children in Narnia who are nervous about meeting Aslan, the Lion King. The child Lucy asks, “Is he - quite safe? I shall feel rather nervous about meeting a lion.” And Mrs. Beaver replies, “That you will, dear, and no mistake. If there’s anyone who can appear before Aslan without their knees knocking, they’re either braver than most or else just silly.” “Then he isn’t safe?” Said Lucy. “Safe?” said Mr. Beaver. “Don’t you hear what Mrs. Beaver tells you? Who said anything about safe? (Of)Course he isn’t safe. But he’s good.”

We want to believe that life is safe but it is not. We want to live in the belief that there is a way to shackle what we fear, to tame that which we do not understand and drive it out of our city but we cannot. We try to foresee, organize, plan and prepare the prospect of chaos right out of our families, our homes, our work, our lives but it simply is not possible. But there is a power greater than all of this that refuses to let fear and pain and chaos have the final word. That power is Jesus Christ. And that power is good.

But like the people standing in terror on the shore, do we not also respond in fear when Christ intervenes in our lives, reorders our understanding, or calls us to weather a storm that shakes us to the core? The gospel writer Mark loves to confront his readers with the fact that Christ is full of power and his presence is going to be powerfully disruptive. And he forces us to consider the fact that we so often respond in fear at the prospect of an untamed God on the loose in the world, in our church, and in our lives. As a Seminary professor of mine once pointed out, we tend to want the power of God’s reign, but we want it domesticated, on a leash. Churches and church leaders today, like the cloud of witnesses to the miracle in our text, tend to care about

¹Mark 3:22

getting programs organized, people in line, and everything in order. We aren't interested in opening ourselves up to the kind of holy chaos that swirls around Jesus.²

But though this kind of unrestrained power is disruptive to be sure, it is that power alone that will ultimately transform our lives. For it promises that with Christ Jesus out of chaos there is hope. This is the motto of the branch of the Presbyterian Church dedicated to disaster relief and recovery³- 'Out of Chaos: Hope.' And along with Mark it challenges us to weather the disruptions so that we can bear witness to God's healing power. To stand firm and face Jesus despite our fear so that we can see the way God is going to work. It calls us not to drive Jesus out of town when our stomach begins to turn over the demons he exorcizes or storms he subdues, but to invite him rather to stick around for still another day that we might bear witness to the redemptive power of his healing presence. And see that by his hand and voice alone all things work together for good.

As the people we met in Mississippi sorted through the rubble of their lives and told stories of tragedy and loss, every single one of them coupled their tale not with a complaint against God but with a word of gratitude for his faithfulness and a litany of praise for the blessings he has given. They asked us to tell you to come see for yourself the power of destruction rivaled only by that of God. To believe that out of chaos in Christ there is always hope.

With our knees knocking, let us trust in the fearful presence of a good God. Let us seek to follow the lion King of Judah, our Lord Jesus Christ.⁴ Amen.

²Dr. Blount, Princeton Theological Seminary

³To learn more about the Presbyterian Disaster Assistance, visit www.pcusa.org/pda

⁴Rev. Elizabeth Patrick. Mt. Zion Presbyterian Church, Sandy Springs, SC, from her sermon, "A Disruptive Presence," preached in January 2006.