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A Sermon for Evening Prayer, 2 Epiphany, Saturday, Year One

This evening, the psalmist cries out for comfort, Paul calls us to strength, and Jesus offers both.

The story of the Gadarene or Gerasene demoniac appears in all three synoptic gospels, but only Mark, usually notable for the brevity of his accounts, gives us the fullest account of the torment of this man. This demoniac has lived for some time, tortured by something inside him. Others have tried to “subdue” him, which seems a strange approach to someone so tortured, and yet, not an unusual approach in human history. Frequently, the very first response to a person howling night and day is to try to restrain them, to subdue them, to get them under control. Some people, even here, even now, live out the better part of their lives in restraints because of others’ fear of what they might do if they were let out. This man has broken all restraints and the people of the country of the Gerasenes have given him up. They have left him to his own devices, where he howls and bruises himself with stones. In language more familiar now: he is a danger to himself, perhaps to others.

He lives among the dead in the tombs, which means that others cannot touch him, according to the commandment in the book of Numbers (19:16) which tells us that contact with a

grave renders a person unclean for seven days. This alone would have seriously limited the avenues to which he could turn for help. But it was not just his abode that separated him, but his howls, his bruises. His people gave him up for lost, and one imagines he has given himself up for lost as well. Bruising himself with stones—self-harming behavior is such a common response to inner torment. Externalizing the inner torment can make it seem more bearable, somehow. The clarity of physical pain, the direct causality of it is—or at least feels—easier to recover from than some nameless, formless agony inside.

Yet, we learn quite quickly that he has not given up on himself as, with typical Markan immediacy, when Jesus had stepped out the boat he was traveling in, the demoniac came immediately out of the tombs to meet him. Jesus is still at quite a distance, and yet this man ran and bowed down before him, speaking with the voice of the demon: “What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I adjure you by God, do not torment me.” So tortured is this man by his own agony that his very voice is not his own—it is the voice of the agony that has nestled down so deeply within him that it does not want to come out. The demon is speaking. The trauma is speaking. They want to protect themselves from healing. They reject healing as hard as they can, and yet, the man comes running to Jesus. When have we known so deeply in our souls that we need healing, so deeply that we run towards it only to reject it when it is offered with open hands? Have you ever encountered someone who challenged you to look at the most terrifying or terrified parts of yourself and screamed within yourself or out loud: NO! No, I will not look there. I will not see that! You don’t want to heal me, you want to tear me to pieces. You

want to tear through this scar tissue I have built over my wound and if I lose this agony I will have nothing left. I will be nothing. I am nothing besides this torment.

I am nothing besides this torment.

Then, “what is your name?” Jesus asks. This is not usually a trick question. What is your name? We know that this answer isn’t really allowed to be very variable. What is your name? Marta. What your name? Dr. Rivera. What is your name? Dr. Marta Schoonmaker Rivera Monclova. But that about covers it. No one asks you, “What is your name, today?” yet if they did, would you answer the same every day? What is your name? Student. What is your name? Editor. What is your name? Preacher. But some days, what is your name? Anxiety. Wound. Trauma. Anger. What is your name, today? Some days something has taken us over so completely that we are not ourselves. And there is, breaking through, a freedom there—the beginning of an opening to being able to name who-or-what-not-yourself you are today. Naming that thing that has taken you over so completely that you are not yourself. Speaking in the voice of the demon, perhaps, but with your own mouth. Speaking the wound into the world may begin to open a little space for you to come back into yourself.

Legion. “My name is Legion; for we are many.” “Send us into the swine; let us enter them.” Swine were not animals that it was lawful for the people to eat. They were unclean, and the demoniac (for is it the man speaking now, or the demons?) wants to send this unclean part of himself, this agony to be among that which is already unclean. This man has taken himself off to

the tombs and has been harming himself for so long, abandoned by his people. Yet even in the moment when he sees the possibility of healing, and wants to move towards it, he makes the brave choice to protect those around him (except, perhaps, of the livelihoods of the swineherds) and to send out that which is torturing him to somewhere it will not harm others. Healing can be like that. When he was howling and people were trying to restrain him, I have to believe that he did harm others, multiple times, which is why we read that no one could restrain him *anymore*. Pain can be like that. Hurt can be so profound and so deeply wedged into you that you will hurt others, even when you didn't mean to, even when it's the last thing you meant to do. Hurt can fool you into thinking that you are not causing the harm you are causing—or that the harm you've done to another was their fault to begin with. But healing so often carries with it the immediate desire to do better. At least not to do more harm.

The swineherds are our only witnesses. They run off to tell others and the people came and saw the demoniac, the ex-demoniac, the human man sitting in his right mind and wearing clothes. And they were afraid. The people who had been coping with this howling, naked, dirty, violent man, perhaps for years, we don't know, were afraid of him in his right mind, calm and clothed. And reintegration can be like that. Healing is one thing, in a vacuum, alone with your healer. It can feel like everything is alright in a moment. The breakthrough, the release, your own personal demonic swine drowned in the sea. It is clear skies from here on out. But the ones that you howled at, and resisted, and fought—they are still afraid. They don't know what you know. Here at the tenderest part of your healing, when everything is new, you see with your fresh eyes that people are afraid of you. And you know they've been afraid of you for a while. The people

beg Jesus to leave: this is all too much, too quick! And the demoniac, the healed man, begs to go with him. Start over in a new place, a place that doesn't know you as the screaming naked man. Of course it is tempting. But healing comes with responsibility—tell your friends how much the Lord has done for you, and what mercy he has shown you. You are healed. It is time to become a healer of others.

We might imagine that Paul's epistle tonight takes us back into the past of the Gerasene demoniac, back to a time when he was not naked and howling and hurting himself. One definition of trauma is what happens when an event or occurrence overwhelms the resources you have available to deal with it. This is a tricky concept to work with, because above all we must approach with without any intention of blame. Paul says, "be strong in the Lord." And again "Put on the whole armor of God" and again, "take the shield of faith, with which you will be able to quench all the flaming arrows of the evil one." Paul is calling for his readers to develop resilience, a resilience that is a collection of resources that will help prevent adverse events from overwhelming us. "Take up the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to withstand on that evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm." To stand firm in the face of evil, to quench the arrows of the evil one—this is the goal. This is the hope of everyone before disaster strikes: to be able to stand firm when it does. Not everyone will. It is no shame to you if you can't, if you haven't, if you won't when it comes. But Paul lays out a goal for us, and offers many tools to achieve that goal: strength, truth, righteousness, proclaiming the gospel of peace, faith, and salvation. This is a huge list, and I don't know about each of you, but I do not remember each one every day. But this Paul is wise here because the Accuser turns these against

us: tells us that our strength is our weakness, that what we know to be true is lies, that righteousness is futile, that the gospel of peace is doomed, that faith is ephemeral, and salvation a pretty myth for children. Those disasters that come, the betrayals by the ones we've loved. The corruption of the ones we've respected. The lies repeated so often that we doubt our truths, these tools that Paul offers us may just help us survive—may just help us not be overwhelmed.

Then Paul offers one more: “Pray in the Spirit at all times in every prayer and supplication.” Prayer is the well from which we draw the water of resilience. Prayer is how we turn to God and say, “this may be too much for my resources, but not for yours, my strength is failing, lend me yours so that I may stand firm.” Pray at all times, Paul says, which is challenging enough, but in 1 Thessalonians, Paul also says “give thanks in all circumstances,” which seems almost impossible. But as a dear advisor recently pointed out, Paul says “give thanks *in* all circumstances” not “*for* all circumstances.” We don't need to welcome disaster when it comes, though that is another strategy recommended by some. But we can always welcome and give thanks for our ability to witness. When we can give thanks in all circumstances (not *for*) we build resilience, we deepen that well, and the deeper the well, the more there is for us when we need it.

Sometimes, even with the useful corrective that we are not called to be thankful *for* all things, Paul can feel like a counsel of perfection. I truly believe that following what he says would lead each of us to greater health, greater healing, greater wholeness. I believe the maybe, just maybe if the Gerasene demoniac had heard Paul preach before his disaster struck, maybe he

would have had the resources, internal and external, to weather that storm and stand firm. But sometimes we do not. Sometimes the disaster is too big. Sometimes our resources are too small.

The psalmist hears us. The psalmist in tonight's reading is not rallying us to strength and to power like Paul, but is sitting with us, in our pain, sharing his own. "As the deer longs for the waterbrooks, so longs my soul for you O God." Prayer is indeed the well from which we draw the water of resilience, but as Teresa of Ávila once wrote, "sometimes you let down the bucket and pull up sand." And then is our "soul athirst, athirst for the living God." Our resources are at an ebb and we cry "When shall I come to appear before the presence of God?" We cry, "Why are you so full of heaviness, O my soul? And why are you so disquieted within me?" Why should I find myself naked and raving, scaring my family and my friends bruising my body day after day, when you, God, could heal me? "Why have you forgotten me? and why do I go so heavily while the enemy oppresses me?" While my bones are being broken, my enemies mock me to my face; All day long they mock me and say to me, "Where now is your God?" In the midst of all this anguish the psalmist is giving us one other message: We are not alone, not only because God is with us because there are times that we *do not feel* God. We are not alone because these words came long before you, these words were written by someone who had felt pain, who had known pain, who had been overwhelmed in the tumult, and who still cries with a small voice at the end. "I will yet give thanks to him."

Appendix A: Psalms 42 and 43

42 *Quemadmodum*

1 As the deer longs for the water-brooks, *
so longs my soul for you, O God.

2 My soul is athirst for God, athirst for the living God; *
when shall I come to appear before the presence of God?

3 My tears have been my food day and night, *
while all day long they say to me,
"Where now is your God?"

4 I pour out my soul when I think on these things; *
how I went with the multitude and led them into the
house of God,

5 With the voice of praise and thanksgiving, *
among those who keep holy-day.

6 Why are you so full of heaviness, O my soul? *
and why are you so disquieted within me?

7 Put your trust in God; *
for I will yet give thanks to him,
who is the help of my countenance, and my God.

8 My soul is heavy within me; *
therefore I will remember you from the land of Jordan,
and from the peak of Mizar among the heights of Hermon.

9 One deep calls to another in the noise of your cataracts; *

all your rapids and floods have gone over me.

10 The Lord grants his loving-kindness in the daytime; *
in the night season his song is with me,
a prayer to the God of my life.

11 I will say to the God of my strength,
"Why have you forgotten me? *
and why do I go so heavily while the enemy
oppresses me?"

12 While my bones are being broken, *
my enemies mock me to my face;

13 All day long they mock me *
and say to me, "Where now is your God?"

14 Why are you so full of heaviness, O my soul? *
and why are you so disquieted within me?

15 Put your trust in God; *
for I will yet give thanks to him,
who is the help of my countenance, and my God.

43 *Judica me, Deus*

1 Give judgment for me, O God,
and defend my cause against an ungodly people; *
deliver me from the deceitful and the wicked.

2 For you are the God of my strength;

why have you put me from you? *
and why do I go so heavily while the enemy
oppresses me?

3 Send out your light and your truth, that they may lead me, *
and bring me to your holy hill
and to your dwelling;

4 That I may go to the altar of God,
to the God of my joy and gladness; *
and on the harp I will give thanks to you, O God my God.

5 Why are you so full of heaviness, O my soul? *
and why are you so disquieted within me?

6 Put your trust in God; *
for I will yet give thanks to him,
who is the help of my countenance, and my God.

Appendix B: Ephesians 6:10-24

10 Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power. 11 Put on the whole armour of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. 12 For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. 13 Therefore take up the whole armour of God, so that you may be able to withstand on that evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm. 14 Stand therefore, and fasten the belt of truth around your waist, and put on the breastplate of righteousness. 15 As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace. 16 With all of these, take the shield of faith, with which you will be able to quench all the flaming arrows of the evil one. 17 Take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.

18 Pray in the Spirit at all times in every prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert and always persevere in supplication for all the saints. 19 Pray also for me, so that when I speak, a message may be given to me to make known with boldness the mystery of the gospel, 20 for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it boldly, as I must speak.

21 So that you also may know how I am and what I am doing, Tychicus will tell you everything. He is a dear brother and a faithful minister in the Lord. 22 I am sending him to you for this very purpose, to let you know how we are, and to encourage your hearts.

23 Peace be to the whole community, and love with faith, from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. 24 Grace be with all who have an undying love for our Lord Jesus Christ.

Appendix C: Mark 5:1-20

They came to the other side of the lake, to the country of the Gerasenes. 2 And when he had stepped out of the boat, immediately a man out of the tombs with an unclean spirit met him. 3 He lived among the tombs; and no one could restrain him any more, even with a chain; 4 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. 5 Night and day among the tombs and on the mountains he was always howling and bruising himself with stones. 6 When he saw Jesus from a distance, he ran and bowed down before him; 7 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.’ 8 For he had said to him, ‘Come out of the man, you unclean spirit!’ 9 Then Jesus asked him, ‘What is your name?’ He replied, ‘My name is Legion; for we are many.’ 10 He begged him earnestly not to send them out of the country. 11 Now there on the hillside a great herd of swine was feeding; 12 and the unclean spirits begged him, ‘Send us into the swine; let us enter them.’ 13 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 lake, and were drowned in the lake.

14 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. 15 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. 16 Those who had seen what had happened to the demoniac and to the swine reported it. 17 Then they began to beg Jesus to leave their neighbourhood. 18 As he was getting into the boat, the man who had been possessed by demons begged him that he might be with him. 19 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.' 20 And he went away and began to proclaim in the Decapolis how much Jesus had done for him; and everyone was amazed.