

Scripture: Mark 5:1-20
Message: The Greatest Power
March 4, 2018; Bethel CRC, Brockville, ON
Pastor Jack Van de Hoef

In this present section of the gospel of Mark, it seems that Mark is emphasizing the greatness of Jesus' power. Jesus teaches about the power of the growing kingdom of God in the parables that are recorded in chapter 4. That chapter ends with evidence of Jesus' power over the forces of nature as seen in the stilling of the storm. In the beginning of chapter 5, we see Jesus' power over the spiritual world in the casting out of the demons. The end of this chapter shows Jesus' power over sickness and death, as he heals a sick woman and raises a dead girl to life.

The purpose of these miracles is not just to show that Jesus can do wonderful things. Jesus is giving a clear expression of the kingdom rule which he has just been speaking about. He has come to bring that kingdom of God into the world and it can be seen in obvious ways. When the rule of God is so clearly evident, there is also a call to respond. Do we believe Jesus is the Lord and Saviour sent from God? Do we accept the rule of the King in this world and in our lives? What difference does that make?

We read that Jesus crossed the lake to the region of the Gerasenes. This is on the eastern side of the Sea of Galilee. It was an area known as the Decapolis because there were 10 Greek cities in that region. Throughout this region there was a scattering of Jews, but it was mostly Gentile territory. This was enemy territory, a place to be avoided.

Jesus crosses into this region and is met by a man with an evil spirit. He is said to be living in the tombs. These were caves dug into the steep cliffs and hills along that part of the lake.

To live among the tombs was a perfect home for this demon-possessed man. It was a place of death and uncleanness where he would be left alone. The people of the region had earlier tried to control this man by binding him with chains. But he was so strong that he would tear the chains apart. So the people turned their backs on this wild creature and left him alone. They avoided the place if at all possible and put up with his constant eerie crying.

When Jesus arrives, this man seems to worship him: he fell on his knees in front of him. But the cry that follows is clearly a demon-controlled fear of Jesus.

The demons realize that Jesus is their opponent, who is out to destroy them. They cry out in anger, frustration, and despair. The demons believe in God. They believe that Jesus is the Son of the Most High God. They fall down before Jesus, not just out of honour, but mostly

out of fear and dread, afraid of ultimate destruction. They recognize in Jesus the power to control and destroy them. Their reaction to this power of Jesus is to plead for mercy: "Swear to God that you won't torture me!" They beg Jesus to not send them out of the area. "Please send us to the pigs." The demons are helpless in front of Jesus. He can do to them whatever he wants and they know it.

Jesus gives them permission to go to the herd of pigs. The result is that the entire herd of 2,000 pigs rushes down the steep bank and into the sea and is drowned. Exactly why this happened or what happened to the demons as a result is unclear. It does reinforce the fact that demons are destructive and their control leads to destruction.

News of this quickly reached the people of the area. "When they came to Jesus, they saw the man who had been possessed by the legion of demons, sitting there, dressed and in his right mind." They knew the man. There was no mistaking him. They had tried so often to tie him down and control him, but they couldn't. They were powerless. They knew he was around because they heard his haunting howl from among the tombs.

Now they see him again. He's dressed and presentable. He's sitting quiet, not howling, without any chains or ropes to hold him down. He's acting...normal.

"and they were afraid." In Jesus they see a power which they have never known or experienced before. They don't know what to make of it. But they *do* know that they don't like it.

They hear the complete story from some witnesses. They hear of how Jesus commanded the evil spirits to come out. And they did! And they are told about the pigs as well.

You might expect an overall reaction of celebration. Sure, there is sadness over the loss of pigs. But should there not be congratulations for the man who was healed? Should they not have brought their sick to Jesus for healing? Can they not see that the loss of material possessions is a small price to pay to bring complete healing to their fellow man?

But they don't see it that way. Instead they plead with Jesus to leave their region. "You're not wanted here, Jesus. You destroy our property. You disturb the way things have always gone around here. We were doing fine. We could live with this demon-possessed man around. He wasn't hurting us and we weren't hurting him. Why did you have to come and mess everything up?! Now just leave, please."

When Jesus gets involved in someone's life, some people can only see the cost of the sacrifice and not the blessing. They do not see the hope and healing that Jesus gives, but only the sacrifice they are expected to make. They cannot see that allowing Jesus to change

their lives would bring more joy than any amount of possessions they could acquire.

Jesus grants their request. He gets in the boat to leave. But the healed man wants to join him. He is so full of joy and gratitude. He wants to go with Jesus to serve him in any and every way possible. But Jesus has other plans for him.

"No," says Jesus. "You need to stay here. Go home to your family and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and how he has had mercy on you." This man, when he first saw Jesus, cried out, "What do you want with me?" Now he is saying, "What do you want me for? What can I do for you?" Without further hesitation, the man goes and obeys.

Jesus tells him to go and tell his story to others. Tell others about meeting Jesus and what a change it brought to his life. This man does not limit himself to talking to family and friends about what the Lord has done. He goes through the whole Decapolis, the whole region across the Jordan River from Israel. Jesus himself is not welcome there. The people have sent him away.

In effect, what Jesus does, is leave a missionary, one of their own people. He is the most effective means of spreading the gospel. As the people hear his story, they are amazed. They are confronted with Jesus and his power to heal and save.

Sometimes we might think that it would be nice to see a miracle happen before our eyes. Then we could see the power of Jesus at work and have an amazing story to tell. We may think it's too bad that we cannot witness the complete transformation of a person's life as a result of the working of Jesus' power. If you are wanting to see a miracle, then look in the mirror.

Jesus works his power in your life. He does not meekly ask if you will pretty please listen to him. It is a direct confrontation. God does not play games with Satan. God knows how destructive Satan is when he controls something. It's as if God has stood beside each one of us and said, "Satan, you have no control over this person. In the name and power of Jesus Christ I've taken that away. My Son, Jesus, has defeated you. You have no control, except what I give you. And I say, this person is mine."

Let me add here that I am not implying an exorcism, a casting out of demons in our lives. Not every sin that we commit is evidence of the devil in us that needs to be cast out. I am referring in a more general way to the power of Satan through the power of sin in our world and in our lives. But Christ has overcome the power of Satan. God has confronted the power of the devil and claimed you as his child. He has set you free from the destructive control of sin and gives new life and freedom to love God and love others. The kingdom of

God has come in power. We can overcome the power of sin.

When we realize the power Jesus gives us, what do we do? When we know the healing grace of forgiveness of sin, what do we do? When we know the power of God's presence in our lives, what do we do? Do we respond like the demon in fear? Not likely.

Do we respond like the people of the countryside and turn away from it? Do we reject the changes that Jesus brings in our lives, the sacrifices we may be called to make and so send Jesus away? Do we say, "Life was going smoothly until I started reading the Bible or until a family member or spouse became a Christian. I'm doing great without giving Jesus too much attention; why disturb things by bringing him into the picture. It's OK to hear about Jesus and his love. Just don't bother me with all the implications of having to live a Christian life."

If you have experienced Jesus' healing grace and forgiveness, how do you show that you follow him? This is more than a one-time profession of faith. We are to be a faithful disciple. He is to have a control in our hearts and lives that expresses our complete surrender to his rule. All we are and do will reflect the presence and power of the Lord in us.

It includes the challenge from Jesus to live our lives in such a way that his presence and power in our hearts is obvious. Tell your story. Use words, if necessary.

Start within our family circles, right at home. Let's make the home a comfortable place to share our joy in knowing we are saved, to express our struggles and doubts about the power of God in our lives, to air our frustrations and celebrations. Parents, tell your children how much God has done for you. Children, talk to your parents. Friends, talk to one another. Talk about faith and trust and hope. As we are comfortable telling our story of faith to those who are close to us, we will more readily be able to tell others—at school, or at work or other contacts in the community.

Jesus is doing great work in our lives, as evidence of the power of God. It is a work of forgiveness of sins. It is a work of victory over temptation. It is a work of equipping us to do what is right. It is a work of the presence of God in our heart.

It's all part of God's Grand Story. You are part of it. You have a story to tell of freedom and relationship. We are free to live in relationship with one another and with the Creator God, who is our Father in Jesus. Tell your story, to the glory of God!

Amen.