

Misplaced Fears

By Mark Jarvinen

INTRODUCTION

As I grew up, and well into adulthood, one of the most popular columns in daily newspapers across the country was a syndicated piece by advice giver, Esther Lederer, better known by her pen name, **Ann Landers**. She began writing her column for the Chicago Sun-Times in 1955, at the age of 37 and continued until her death in 2002, at the age of 83. One of her famous quotes reads as follows: **“Expect trouble as an inevitable part of life and repeat to yourself the most comforting phrases of all; `this too shall pass.”** During her career, it was reported that she received an average of 10,000 letters per month, mostly from people burdened with problems. She was asked if there was any one problem that seemed to surpass the rest and her reply was **“the one problem above all others seems to be fear.”** (Signs of the Times, by Paul Lee Tan) Based on Ann Landers’ experience, it seems fair to conclude that although fears are prevalent and real, they are often exaggerated and in many ways, misplaced. Today’s message deals with how misplaced fears impact even those who are curious about Christ and what it means to follow Him.

TODAY’S TEXT

Today, I’m reading from **Luke 8:26-39** in Jesus’ Name:

²⁶ They sailed to the region of the Gerasenes which is across the lake from Galilee. ²⁷ When Jesus stepped ashore, he was met by a demon-possessed man from the town. For a long time this man had not worn clothes or lived in a house, but had lived in the tombs.

²⁸ When he saw Jesus, he cried out and fell at his feet, shouting at the top of his voice, "What do you want with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I beg you, don't torture me!" ²⁹ For Jesus had commanded the impure spirit to come out of the man. Many times it had seized him, and though he was chained hand and foot and kept under guard, he had broken his chains and had been driven by the demon into solitary places.

³⁰ Jesus asked him, "What is your name?"

"Legion," he replied, because many demons had gone into him.

³¹ And they begged Jesus repeatedly not to order them to go into the Abyss.

³² A large herd of pigs was feeding there on the hillside. The demons begged Jesus to let them go into the pigs, and he gave them permission. ³³ When the demons came out of the man, they went into the pigs, and the herd rushed down the steep bank into the lake and was drowned.

³⁴ When those tending the pigs saw what had happened, they ran off and reported this in the town and countryside, ³⁵ and the people went out to see what had happened. When they came to Jesus, they found the man from whom the demons had gone out, sitting at Jesus' feet, dressed and in his right mind; and they were afraid. ³⁶ Those who had seen it told the people how the demon-possessed man had been cured. ³⁷ Then all the people of the region of the Gerasenes asked Jesus to leave them, because they were overcome with fear. So he got into the boat and left.

³⁸ The man from whom the demons had gone out begged to go with him, but Jesus sent him away, saying, ³⁹ "Return home and tell how much God has done for you." So the man went away and told all over town how much Jesus had done for him.

AN EERIE ENCOUNTER WITH A MADMAN.

Jesus and His disciples sailed across the Sea of Galilee to the Gentile region of the Gerasenes. When Jesus stepped on shore, He

was met by a ***“demon-possessed man from the town,”*** who now lived in isolation among the tombs overlooking the beach. This demoniac’s life had long ago spun out of control. However, the fact that a demon-possessed man lived in the tombs outside of town wasn’t the factor that scared the people the most when they later heard the details of this story. Jesus commanded the evil spirit to come out of him and this naked madman stormed wildly toward Him, sensing His power. Picture him with wild, matted hair, bloody wrists, and scratched skin from the chains that could no longer hold him - naked fury encased in flesh, arms flailing and voice screaming at the top of his lungs, ***“What do you want with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I beg you, don’t torture me!”*** Clearly, evil supernatural forces were at work. I can imagine Jesus’ disciples being plenty scared at this point. For all we know, they may have run back to the boat. Yet, neither is this what the text tells us scared the townspeople when they heard the story. Then Jesus asks the man his name and there’s that dramatic moment when the man simply replies with a one word answer, ***“Legion,”*** [a word denoting thousands] ***“because many demons had gone into him.”*** I don’t know about you, but my fear level is spiking right now. Even so, the Gerasenes weren’t that surprised to hear this when it was reported to them. Finally, Jesus exorcises the demons from the man and allows them to go into a herd of pigs, who promptly run wild off a nearby cliff and drown in the lake below. What strange and eerie events! Yet, this still is not what most frightened the Gerasenes.

WHAT CAUSED THE FEAR OF THE GERASENES?

Verses 34-35 hold the key. Luke writes:

34 When those tending the pigs saw what had happened, they ran off and reported this in the town and countryside, 35 and the people went out to see what had happened. When they came to Jesus, they found the man from whom the demons had gone out, sitting at Jesus' feet, dressed and in his right mind; AND THEY WERE AFRAID.

I've been trying to put myself in the place of these Gerasene townspeople throughout this entire story. I'd have been petrified! Wouldn't you? But the townspeople had become accustomed to the weirdness of this demoniac's antics. If asked about him, I can imagine them saying:

"Yeah, we know all about Crazy Joe. He's been running around in the tombs for years. Not a chain's been made that can hold down old Crazy Joe. He's not in his right mind. He's made some pretty bad choices. He's touched in the head. Evil's got a hold of him. He can't be around people. It's best to leave him alone."

It wasn't frightening to them that the man was possessed by evil. What caused them to fear was that the man who was evil, had become good. He seemed normal, ***"sitting at Jesus' feet, dressed and in his right mind;"*** What frightens them is not the unholy, but the holy. Lest you think it was only a few who had this reaction listen to vv. 36-37:

36 Those who had seen it told the people how the demon-possessed man had been cured. 37 Then all the people of the region of the Gerasenes asked Jesus to leave them, because they were overcome with fear. So he got into the boat and left.

The work of Jesus had not only made them uncomfortable. It was hair-raising, weak-kneed, blood curdling fear that Jesus' healing of

this demon possessed man had brought about. The very thing that could have brought them a sense of reverent wonder and an awesome adoration of God, in fact, had the opposite effect. What could have created comfort and hope in their hearts, that through Jesus, a desperately needy man in bondage to evil, had now been victoriously delivered and gloriously set free; had only brought them fear and aroused their unbelief. Finding no faith among the townspeople, Jesus simply got back in the boat and left. Their fear and unbelief, in effect, drove Jesus out of town.

Isn't it strange that by nature human beings have misplaced fears? The old Adam is afraid of and wants to avoid what's holy, righteous, and good, but accepts and accommodates what's unholy, unrighteous, and evil. The old nature loves darkness instead of light. Based on our text, a community can more easily tolerate a crazy, naked man living in their cemetery, than receive the very One who healed him. **Lest we too quickly judge the townspeople, may I suggest that their problem is our problem.** As Christians, we struggle with the old nature every day in what the Apostle Paul calls the battle between the flesh and the Spirit. Furthermore, we live in a world that heightens the struggle.

OUR COMFORT WITH EVIL

Our society seems increasingly comfortable with evil. Author, **William Bennett**, wrote a little book as the 21st century began entitled, **The Death of Outrage**. In the book he highlighted how easy it had become to accept misconduct without hesitation. Bennett said

– ***“It’s not that we forgive people for their flaws (the biblical thing to do); we simply excuse their behavior,”*** in essence ignoring it and acting like it never happened. In the OT, the prophet Jeremiah says something similar as he talks about the spiritual condition of the people of God. Their lifestyles had degenerated. Their cities were filled with crime. Jeremiah looks around and says, in **6:15** – ***“Are they ashamed of their loathsome conduct? No, they have no shame at all; they do not even know how to blush.”***

And so, what happens in a society where there is no sense of shame, where we have forgotten how to blush? History buffs can point to **Hitler’s Germany** and the systematic execution of 6 million Jews, and hope that such an atrocity will never happen again. Yet, the problem is still with us, as we read newspaper headlines again and again, in gruesome detail, that evil is still with us. Doesn’t it seem like there’s something missing in our society today? I don’t advocate shame based rhetoric that only heaps on guilt and further damages lives; but the Bible teaches a healthy spirituality that includes a sensitivity to sin and the damage caused by evil. Is there hope? Is there an answer?

JESUS IS THE ANSWER

Jesus Christ is the hope of the world. He did not come to condemn the world, but to save it (**John 3:17**). What happens when a community (or a society), in its misplaced fear asks Jesus to leave, as did the Gerasenes of our text? Our text says that Jesus ***“got in the boat and left.”*** This was not the time or place for further ministry. However, did Jesus stop loving the Gerasenes? Of course not! His

love for sinners is constant and unconditional. He wants ***“all men to be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth”*** (I Timothy 2:4).

Note what Jesus does next in vv. 38-39:

³⁸ The man from whom the demons had gone out begged to go with him, but Jesus sent him away, saying, ³⁹ “Return home and tell how much God has done for you.” So the man went away and told all over town how much Jesus had done for him.

Jesus left, but leaves behind a gospel witness. Missionary work isn't only done in other countries. How encouraging! This is where we come in. We are called to remember and rejoice in what Jesus, our Savior, has done for us – that He has by grace, healed, restored, and forgiven us. As we live in this American society of the 21st century, when it certainly seems that evil is on the rise and as a nation we've forgotten how to blush, where people aren't as responsive to the message of the gospel as they once were, and there are plenty of instances in which the church hasn't been as loving and redemptive as it was called to be, we are called to be salt and light in our society. We are those commissioned to tell all over town how much Jesus has done for us. This is God's Word to the church in America today. This is the message for Community of Joy in this time and place. **A-men.**