



Joy Squelched in Fear

Matthew 8:28-34

We began the season of Advent three weeks ago talking about hope. The Jews were full of hopes, even if they did not expect them to be fulfilled exactly the way God had planned. Their expectations ruled a good part of their thinking and directed how and where their hope could come to be fulfilled. Distancing themselves from such expectations, it was difficult to see much beyond their discomfort with the fact of God not proceeding according to the norms of their thought. Fleeing from these determinations caused them fear and anxiety, such that they could not celebrate God's grace and love with pleasure. It was not simply the Jews that acted this way. It seems that we all act at least in part in the same manner. When God does not obey our ideas, are we able to celebrate with happiness and joy, or do we squelch what should be a celebration of joy because of our fear of the unknown?

Jesus arrived in an unexpected manner in Bethlehem. He also arrived in unexpected ways in many other places through which he passed. His arrival in Jerusalem caused wonder and agitation. His return as an adult to Nazareth provoked problems and anger. When he arrived in the region of the Gadarenes, it was no different. He encountered people who were unprepared to receive him. He arrived to offer a freedom for life according to the ample norms of God's grace. The people were not ready to such. They worried too much over daily concerns, such that it was not possible for them to see the liberal quality of divine grace as evidenced in the words and actions of Jesus. They had a box into which God was supposed to act and He did not obey their rules. To the Jews, the Gadarenes did not obey the rules, but they had the same perspective regarding the Jews and Jesus, as well.

They were occupied with the business of living. They all had their tasks and to look at life from a distinct perspective would cost them energy they could not spare to invest in Jesus. Beyond that, life was already difficult and they needed to give all their attention and resources to earning their daily bread. To face Jesus depended on letting go of their routines that they might attend to what God wanted of them.

Jesus had arrived and encountered two men esteemed as very violent and out of control. They were possessed by demons and were not in their right minds. All the people feared them. They could do nothing with them. Their families had lost all hope towards doing anything towards helping them. They were outside the norms of hope. No one knew how to treat them, beyond simply ignoring them completely. No one could do any more for them than drop some food where they could reach it. Their families, friends, and acquaintances had disassociated themselves from these men, since there was no remedy. The people counted them as lost and returned to their tasks, resigned to their being no solution.

They said the men were controlled by demons—the term applied to the gods of the world around Israel. There was no clear distinction of what demonic influence was, but they accepted that it was some kind of evil force beyond their reach and control. Who is going to control a god, even if it is one of the lesser gods? As they had problems defining demonic influence, we also have trouble interpreting texts that speak of the demon-possessed. It may well be in certain cases some unknown infirmity like epilepsy. In other instances we do well to remember that disease was considered the result of demonic influence, and they simply wrote from that perspective. The story at hand is somewhat different. Here we see actions that are not explained simply by questions of disease and cure. The pigs throwing themselves into the sea have no visible connection with the healing of an infirmity.

Perhaps it was due in part to this that so much fear came upon the people of Gadara. The men were not simply ill as the result of some demonic influence. Their lives had been transformed to the point they could no longer be recognized for who they had been. They were no longer fathers of families, nor sons cooperating in working to benefit their relatives. They had changed into a burden on their community. They made no contribution and they subtracted resources through their violent deeds and actions. They took away, but they added nothing to anyone, except for torment.

It was these men Jesus first met. They needed liberation, but they did not even have a way to ask for such help. The men were not the ones to speak with Jesus, rather the demons possessing them. They were voices of conflict, violence, anger, and fear that came to speak with Jesus. They spoke with dread and refused to see the grace and love of God in Christ. They spoke of what was in their own character, for that was all they could imagine finding in Jesus. “Why are you here?” they said. “Have you come to punish us before the time of the final judgment?”

This was their understanding of God. They thought of God as the Great Punisher, the Supreme Vindictive One! They projected that way, for that was the identity of those speaking with Jesus. They did not understand the grace of God, for they did not have a similar grace within themselves with which to compare Jesus’ actions. They were limited to their experience and perspective in life. Jesus was not like that, but they did not have the imagination to understand who he was and what he was like.

Contrary to expectations, Jesus liberated these men from the demons and at the same time freed the demons from their expectations of immediate punishment and judgment. Jesus transformed the lives of the two men, such that they dressed themselves with clothing as well as with mental and emotional health. That is not where the story ends, however. God rescued these two prisoners from the demons, but the people who cared for the pigs were still intimidated. It was no demonic oppression yet operating in their lives. It was a failed perception of the presence and action of God that held them captive.

They ran to the village to tell what had happened. They were afraid, in part for the possibility of losing their jobs. The owners of the swine lost in the sea were not happy. The people came to face Jesus. They were no longer worried about the men freed and returned to society as those who could care for their families and make contributions to society. They could not see the change in these they had earlier brushed off. They did not see Jesus as God’s blessing—God present in grace and love, rescuing the lost. They did not understand the reason for joy present before them. They only saw their fear before the unexpected. They saw their terror before economic loss, not the freedom extended to all.

It is not that different for us, is it? We focus more on questions of routine procedures than changes in life. Without meaning to, we give greater value to the “practical” questions of living than the cost and personal value of liberating lives. Jesus’ presence and action was reason for rejoicing, but they did not see it. They did not weigh the facts to verify the impact of God in their midst through Jesus. Their fear and uncertainty overly impeded what could have been a great reason to celebrate. When it was time to party, their fear intervened. They missed the party. They missed the happiness of seeing God’s salvation interrupting their daily lives with the creation of new possibilities. They did not see the happiness, for they looked with fear at the new—that God distorted their comfort. On this side of the story, we can celebrate new life and opportunity offered to these Gadarenes. When God comes to interrupt our comfort, however, will we be ready to celebrate, or will we seek refuge in our fear?

—*Christopher B. Harbin*