

## “Who is This Man? Jesus in the Book of Mark – Casting Out Demons”

Good Morning! Today we are continuing a series about the Jesus we see in the Gospel of Mark and asking two questions...“Who is Jesus?” and “What does his life have to do with me?” We're looking at Mark because this is the earliest written source we have and because the questions we are asking are exactly the questions Mark is trying to answer with this gospel.

In the first message in this series, Pastor Aaron gave us good background. I'd encourage you to go back and read that message if you didn't hear it. You can find it at [www.spwired.com](http://www.spwired.com), along with all the messages for several years back. Also in the first message we looked at Jesus' baptism as a defining moment for his identity as God's son and the launching point for his mission as savior.

Last week, we looked at the calling of the disciples and why Jesus chose those ragamuffins and what he entrusted to them and we could easily see our us in their very human characteristics and we listened for God's call in us to help Jesus carry out his mission.

Today we are going to look at the healing ministry of Jesus. One of Mark's themes as he answers the question of “who is Jesus” is that we see our answer in Jesus' miracles. Miracles are signs or tangible witnesses of Kingdom of God. If the God of the universe is walking this earth, then it makes sense that Jesus would show us what it looks like when God's will is done on earth as it is in heaven. Jesus goes about reversing the sin and brokenness of this world when he opens the eyes of the blind, restores hearing to the deaf, making the lame walk again, raising the dead to life, etc. These are the signs that God's Kingdom is breaking into our world.

Another thing we see when we look at the healing ministry of Jesus is that Jesus is revealing his heart to us...revealing God's heart. We see this in his compassion. When Jesus is confronted with illnesses and pain, he cannot turn a blind eye to it. He is deeply moved by compassion. In **Mark 1:40-41**, we get a glimpse of Jesus' heart...***A man with leprosy came to him and begged him on his knees, “If you are willing, you can make me clean.” Filled with compassion, Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man. “I am willing”, Jesus said, “Be clean!” Immediately the leprosy left him and he was cured.***

This deep compassion in Jesus also caused a problem. Once word gets out about healing, the crowds become so thick and the demands are so high that it prevents him from doing anything else. We get a picture of this in chapter 1, when Mark tells us that the whole town was gathered at the house where he was staying into the evening. As you read Mark, you will notice that Jesus often tells people he heals not to tell anyone, and that's because once the word gets out, he's unable to do anything else because of the crowds.

So that's a bit about the general healing ministry of Jesus, now let's take a look at our story for today. It's called, “The Healing of the Gerasene Demoniac” and we find it at the beginning of Mark chapter 5...

***They went across the lake to the region of the Gerasenes. When Jesus got out of the boat, a man with an evil spirit came from the tombs to meet him. This man lived in the tombs, and no one could bind him anymore, not even with a chain. For he had often been chained hand and foot, but he tore the chains apart and broke the irons on his feet. No one was strong enough to subdue him. Night and day among the tombs and in the hills he would cry out and cut himself with stones.***

***When he saw Jesus from a distance, he ran and fell on his knees in front of him. He shouted at the top of his voice, “What do you want with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? In God's name don't torture me!” For Jesus had said to him, “Come out of this man, you evil spirit!”***

***Then Jesus asked him, “What is your name?”***

***“My name is Legion,” he replied, “for we are many.” And he begged Jesus again and again not to send them out of the area.***

***A large herd of pigs was feeding on the nearby hillside. The demons begged Jesus, “Send us among the pigs; allow us to go into them.” He gave them permission, and the evil spirits came out and went into the pigs. The herd, about two thousand in number, rushed down the steep bank into the lake and were drowned.***

***Those tending the pigs ran off and reported this in the town and countryside, and the people went out to see what had happened. 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; and they were afraid. Those who had seen it told the people what had happened to the demon-possessed man—and told about the pigs as well. Then the people began to plead with Jesus to leave their region.***

***As Jesus was getting into the boat, the man who had been demon-possessed begged to go with him. Jesus did not let him, but said, “Go home to your own people and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and how he has had mercy on you.” So the man went away and began to tell in the Decapolis how much Jesus had done for him. And all the people were amazed.***

Among the variety of healings that Jesus performed was the casting out of demons. Many of us in the modern world have problems with the passages in the new testament that deal with demons. Maybe, like me, all you can

think about is Jack Nicholson...by the way, demon-possession is big in the movies, which means we can at least imagine it. A really well-done movie about demon possession was a Denzel Washington flick called "Fallen", and who could forget "The Exorcist"? There was even demon possession in Ghostbusters! So the images we do have of demon possession come largely from far-fetched hollywood plots, which may add to our difficulty of relating to stories like this one in the Bible.

Many of us, as modern people who live in the scientific age, have a hard time relating to the idea of demons at all, so stories like this one from Mark don't seem to connect to us because we have such a radically different understanding of the world. So what did people in the first century believe about demons? What was their world-view like?

Most cultures of the ancient world believed in demons. For some cultures they were demi-gods and the word "demon" really means "Knowing ones". In some cultures demons could be both good and evil. In the Biblical context, demons are spiritual beings in rebellion to God. The chief demon was satan, or the devil. Good spiritual beings are called "angels".

Some peoples of the ancient world thought that demons were the spirits of deceased people who were evil and who were not allowed to leave this world. So cemeteries were the places where the demons hung out, and you should notice that the setting for our story today is in a cemetery.

Many different cultures believed that diseases that could not be explained in some other way were caused by demons who afflicted people. Now today we don't see illnesses in the same way. When we look into scripture, we may see one of the signs of demon possession looks like epilepsy, but we don't believe in the modern world that an epileptic is evil! But in the ancient world, they needed an explanation as to why something affected some people but not others. So things that today we would call mental illness or some other disease were often believed to be the result of demon affliction in the ancient world.

When we read about demons in the Bible, we have some choices about the way we interpret that or fit it into our scientific world-view. And there are basically three ways that Christians deal with this. The first is to accept that the Biblical view of demons is correct just as they are portrayed in the Bible and that they still act and afflict people today in the same way that demons did in this story. Some people see the world this way, that they are stuck in the middle of this battle, this spiritual warfare between good and evil and that battleground is their life, their soul.

Some fundamental, conservative Christian theologians see it a little differently. They believe that Jesus, through his death and resurrection, has bound Satan's power. This view asserts that through Jesus' victory over death, the power of sin and evil has been defeated and now has only limited impact on the world, so we don't see demonic activity today to the same degree.

Some other theologians Christians think that the pre-scientific world just saw things differently, and that doesn't mean we have to believe the same things. When the Bible mentions the four corners of the earth as it does in Ezekiel and Revelation, we don't have to believe the ancient view that the earth is flat. It's possible to see other valid meanings in those passages or not to interpret them literally. They apply this same thing to the idea of demons, and that Jesus simply didn't feel the need to correct their faulty mis-diagnoses of diseases. Instead, Jesus casts out the illness, whatever it was, and because the people believed it was demons, he didn't feel the need to correct that...he just took care of it. So we are just left with the idea of demons because of the context of the culture in which the Bible was written.

Where I stand with all this is a bit of a mixture - a middle road in these options. Again, this is all in the realm of interpretation, so it's OK to agree to disagree about this stuff. I believe in spiritual entities of demons and angels. I don't believe that they are sitting on my shoulders and I am stuck in this battle between them, almost powerless to make a decision. I feel like I am pretty capable of doing evil all by myself without a demon whispering into my ear. There are times when I get a whisper or notion of temptation and I wonder where that comes from...maybe from within me, but maybe not.

I don't focus very much energy on demons and spiritual warfare stuff. What I try to do is say, "Lord, here is my life. I want to walk life with you and I want to live for your purposes". If I'm focused on that, then I don't need to focus on anything else. I believe evil does have power in our world, but that the power of evil is limited. I believe it is so limited that demons cannot take over my life unless I have opened the door to them and invited them in...more on that later.

Now I'd like to turn more specifically to our story today. This story was treasured by the early church, and we know that because Matthew, Mark and Luke all share this story with their communities, so it was widely told. Now as we look at this story, I want to help us get into the mindset of the people to whom Mark was writing, so we can hear parts of this story from their perspective.

Remember from the first week of this series that Mark is writing to the church in Rome in the mid-60's AD. We learned that this same time period and same location was when the emperor Nero initiated a persecution against the Christians and that Paul and Peter were both killed in this persecution. Nero was putting Christians to death...some by being bound to a stake and burned. It is told in the roman histories that Nero took some Christians,

had them tarred, then hung them and set them on fire as lanterns at his parties.

Nero may be the one who launches this bloody persecution, but it is the roman guard, members of the army who actually carry out the orders. These were members of roman legions, infantry units of the roman army.

Now with that in mind let's take a look at what we learn from the story...maybe more specifically, how we find ourselves in this story.

The first thing I want to lift up in this story is that it seems as if Jesus comes across the lake to this gentile area just to encounter this one man. He doesn't do anything else while he's there, in fact, they ask him to leave after this story. This is pretty important because it tells us a couple of things about Jesus...one is that his ministry is not just for Israel, but that his grace is for everyone. We also learn that Jesus will go to extreme lengths to free us. It's kind of like the Jesus we see through the parable of the lost sheep, when Jesus says that the people who are lost in life without God are so important to him that he will go out and search for them.

This is good news isn't it? You can't be so lost that Jesus doesn't care. You can't be so lost that you are worse off than a gentile, homeless, outcast, violent, man possessed by thousands of demons. Symbolically, you can't get any further from God than this man was. He was three times unclean...one because he's a gentile, two because he's demon-possessed and three because he's living among the tombs. This story is meant to show us that the extent of Jesus' love goes out even to him...and if to him, then why not to me?

This is good news. Jesus loved that man when he was really messed up. And Jesus loves us in our messes too. No matter how bad our mess is, no matter our mistakes, our issues, our past or our present, Jesus wants to free us from it through his love. That's good news!

The next thing we see is that there is no power greater than Jesus' power. Think about this story...Jesus is confronted by a man who is possessed by thousands of demons. And what do they do, immediately? They recognize him as Lord, bow down before him and beg him to leave them alone. Who is in control here? Who are the fearful ones here?

Part of the beauty of this story for the Christians in Rome is the name of the demons...legion. What is the message? It's that ultimately, the mighty roman army, under its evil leader, Nero, has no real power compared to Jesus. The legions who come and take our friends and family away to be persecuted, the evil that is behind that, ultimately have no power to stand up against the power of Christ and his resurrection.

The biblical picture of the struggle between God and Evil is not a balanced distribution of power. The bible is very clear that evil does have power in our temporary and material world, but ultimately the victory belongs to God and to his Christ, the resurrected savior of the world.

In this story, the demons beg Jesus to send them into the pigs! What kind of power does Jesus have over them that they think residing in the pigs is a better option. And even then the herd takes off for the sea and the demons kill themselves. For the people of the roman church, this depicts a beautiful irony and a powerful spiritual truth; the roman army, with all its power and might and strength to subdue the nations of the earth is really nothing greater than a herd of pigs comically running to its death in the sea when it stands against the power of the resurrection of Jesus. No matter how real or oppressing or over-whelming our demons may be right now, they are powerless against the love and resurrection of Jesus.

So these things made the story very powerful for the early church, but maybe what made it most powerful for them is what can make it most powerful for us...they identified with the demon-possessed man. That's who we are in this story!

He represents us. Through him we remember that without Christ we are broken inside and that we will follow spiritual forces of darkness in this world. He reminds us that without Christ we tend to be among the living dead...just as he walked around the tombs and hung out there, our lives can also be dead on the inside...living without purpose...living without the relationship with God that brings light and life to us. Like him, we are unclean. Our mistakes and our sin make us long for spiritual cleansing.

Like him, we have our demons. I do believe that we all have demons that afflict us. They may be literal demons, but most definitely we all have our metaphorical demons. They will alienate us from people who love us, they will make us hunger for life and lead us to look in all the wrong places. They will take root in our soul and darkness and fear will grow and overcome us. There is a scene in *Walk the Line*, the movie about Johnny Cash, where he is holding a pill in his hand and he has a choice...he can flush it or he can take it. He takes it, and from that time on, that pill is his demon.

I don't believe the devil has any power to get inside us. Now, satan will keep knocking at the door. But we open that door. When we say "yes" to something that can enslave us or destroy us, then whatever it is becomes our demon. When we open that door, then the demon (literal or figurative) comes in, takes up residence and begins to overtake us...becomes bigger than us.

What are your demons? To what have you opened the door...something dark that has taken root in your soul? Images on the computer screen? pill or pipe in your hand? contents of your glass? Bitterness and resentment; falsehood or deception; greed, lust, racism, bigotry, hate? Anger? These are all demons just the same and when

you let them in they have the power to devour you from the inside out! They make us feel like we're the living dead.

About ten years ago we were assigned to go to a new church. I had only been in town less than a month or so when I got a call to do a funeral. I didn't know the family but the director said they were from out of town, but the lady who died had raised her family in this community even though none of them lived here now.

It didn't take me long to discover that this family was in an all-out full scale war! One side said that the other couldn't understand that grandma needed better care and the other side claimed that grandma was "stolen" from them and put away to die and it was bitter and ugly. It was so bad that all of the family's connections in town, from either side of the feud, knew about it.

One grandson was a pall-bearer. He was several years younger than me and honestly I don't think I've ever seen anyone else in my life so filled with hatred and anger and resentment. It was a demon that was literally eating him up from the inside out.

It was so bad that after the service, after the casket was loaded into the hearse and before we climbed in to go to the cemetery, I pulled this man aside and told him that he was going to have to give up his anger. He needed to turn to Jesus and give it away, or it was going to kill him. He just shook his head. He couldn't do it.

I don't know if this man continues to walk among the living dead. But he was a time bomb. Anything and anyone that came across his path has the potential to set him off and this demon will cost him dearly in time...maybe even his most crucial relationships. This demon was devouring him from the inside out. My prayer is that he has let Jesus cast out this demon. This man is us. The demoniac is us. We all have some experience of something getting inside us and taking control of our urges and compulsions. We all know something about being possessed by something!

The good news in this story is that Jesus has the power to cast our demons away from us...more than the power, Jesus has the desire. Jesus will travel to any length to come save us from the demons we have invited into our lives. So what are the demons that have afflicted or are afflicting your life? What have you opened the door to that is bringing brokenness and darkness and death to your soul? Jesus wants to free you today.

I've seen lives of people who have struggled with the demons of alcohol and addiction; with pornography and lust; with bitterness and resentment; even with demon of apathy; and they have invited Jesus to come into their lives and cast out their demons...they've said, "Jesus, clean up my life, it's such a mess, cast out my demons and help me live for you and follow you."

And sometimes it's an instantaneous cleansing and sometimes it's a process of daily inviting Jesus to cleanse us. If it takes years for us to let demons in, it may take years of pushing them out, but the Holy Spirit works in us and transforms our minds and purifies our hearts bit by bit from the inside out..and works God's healing in us.

And as that freedom comes we feel clean and new. I've seen it over and over. It's happened to me...it's happened to so many of you! You know the truth of this ancient story because this story is your story too!

And if there's some demon in your life, something that binds you or holds you enslaved and brings brokenness and darkness, the great news is that you too can find freedom and new life and be made clean, because Jesus is still in the business of casting out demons!

And here's the rest of the story...Jesus has healed this man and the crowds want Jesus to leave. They've seen what he can do for them or for others, but instead of asking him to stay, they ask him to leave because they also see all those pigs in the sea and they don't like the economic impact of Jesus' ministry. And Jesus doesn't stay where he's not welcome.

So Jesus turns to leave and this healed man asks if he can go with Jesus. Jesus says no, that the healed man should stay here and tell people what God has done for you. And the end of the story tells us that is exactly what the man did, and that all the people were amazed.

Some people are called to follow Jesus for three years in seminary and become pastors. Some people are called to follow Jesus into full-time or part-time positions of ministry. Some people are called to follow Jesus to far off places and become missionaries. But most people are called to do exactly what Jesus asked this man to do...to go back to your family and friends and the people who knew you as you were and tell them what God has done for you...and let them be amazed!

The first missionary to the gentiles was not Paul. It was a formerly demon-possessed, homeless man that Jesus searched for, loved, healed and sent into the world to tell others about God's love. That's the good news of this man's story. And his good news is our good news, because his story is our story.