

**Augusta First Baptist Church**

**February 11, 2007**

**Mark 5:1-13**

***When God Asks the Question: What is Your Name***

Mark 5:1-13

*“They came to the other side of the sea, 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 sea, and were drowned in the sea.”*

The story read this morning opens with Jesus and his disciples crossing the sea of Galilee, leaving their familiar surroundings and going, as the gospel puts it, *to the other side*. This is the land of Gerasenes. If this were made into a film, I imagine a dark night where the fog hung like gauze. Subtly, you hear Jesus and the disciples gently pushing against their oars until their boat glides into a haunting landing. They disembark with expressions of wide-eyed apprehension, even fear. Just before arriving to this strange village Jesus and his disciples had encountered a windstorm where waves beat alongside the boat. In their panic they woke Jesus up and someone blurted out, *“Don’t you even care that we are perishing here?”* The disciples nerves are on edge. It doesn’t help that they find themselves in this strange land across the Sea of Galilee, far away from home.

Fatigued and perhaps homesick the first person they meet is himself a frightening figure, who, ironically enough, is a pretty alienated character himself. He is cut-off from his community – he lived in the cemetery – his lives in isolation from his neighbors, his family and God. He is a man, as one writer phrases it, *“Without a home. His condition is hopeless.”* Jesus and his followers have gone to the other-side. Have you ever been to the other-side where demons roam and hope is lost?

My first pastorate after graduating from seminary was a great small church in a little town in Georgia. I had not been there long before I met many of her characters. There was Sandy who was in her fifties and loved to dress in costume every Sunday. One Sunday she might be wearing a Viking helmet and the next it could be a baseball cap of goofy, complete with long ears. And then there was “Richard” (not his real name). The town was scared of him, and for good reason. He had been in prison for several years because he shot a man. Richard was also terribly sick – schizophrenic. He would visit me often, bring his pills. Sometimes he would cry and sometimes you could see his anger boil up. It was all so sad, to see a man tormented. I had to participate in having him committed to the state mental institution. I have been to the other-side many times not just in former pastorates but right here in Augusta. I suspect you have too.

When I read about Jesus and his bunch traveling to the other side of the sea to the country of Gerasenes I think of Sandy and Richard and so many others who dwell on “the other-side.” And so, we have this is a story about hope; about God’s arrival to the other side of our dark and stormy lives.

**“What is your name?”** A question of God to a man possessed of demons. I know what you are probably thinking: while this is an entertaining story, it bears little relevance to our modern lives today,

certainly not to the good and distinguished and well-ordered lives of this very gathering this morning. Demon possession, so our reasoning goes, is a vestige of ancient times and far-away places. To be possessed of demons may be something experienced in third world or less-developing countries, but who ever heard of such a thing in Augusta, GA. Hmmm.

Have you ever met chaos? Then you have met demons.

Here is what I mean by chaos: when this man answered the question of Jesus – “*What is your name?*” - he said his name was “Legion.” Legion is borrowed from the Latin and refers to an army unit of four to six thousand men. Here is a man tormented by the voices and personalities of many. He might as well have answered Jesus by replying, “**my name is chaos.**” In fact, this man was the archetype of chaos. He lived like a wild animal among the tombs, breaking chains, howling in the night and throwing himself onto the stones.

Have you ever been around someone named chaos? Have you ever met an alcoholic? Then you have met chaos. Of course, alcoholics are not the only ones named “chaos.” We meet others: Smelly, foul mouthed, dirty clothed and demented... Have you ever known someone that was as good as gold in every other way but had a temper that belittled all who crossed his or her path? Have you ever experienced depression? I don't mean just feeling sad or having the blues. I am talking about feeling as though you are in a dark hole and there is no way out or through.

If you have, then you have been to the other side and met chaos. And let me tell you friend, when chaos rules, it does so by the hand of evil powers. We may psychoanalyze it, we may diagnose it, we may prescribe medicine and treatment, but ultimately it is a spiritual thing. Let me hasten to add that treatments including therapy, medicines and so forth are important to the pathway to healing. Indeed, in many such cases they are necessary. But at its root, a life named chaos is a spiritual matter. And this is how the gospel writer Mark frames it. This is a spiritual story. What is your name? My name is Legion. I am chaos.

And we have borne the name too. We have been to the edge, to the other side. We have been chained down, marginalized and misunderstood. Oh, we may not get locked up for it, but you know what it is like to be right there at the edge of despair, on the periphery of hopelessness. Soren Kierkegaard says that despair is really the beginning of hope, because that is the point at which we give up. We stop trying to save ourselves. We finally reach the point at which we are willing to turn our lives over.

When the man with unclean spirits saw Jesus from a distance, he ran and bowed down before him, 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." For Jesus had said to him, "Come out of the man, you unclean spirit!" Somehow Jesus knew something that I am not sure the disciples realized and the tormented and demented man of Gerasene did not: that even when everyone else keeps you on the edge and refuses to have anything to do with you, God will reach you, on the other-side. Jesus knew God was the one who reaches and embraces, who ignores the chained-down, the shut-out, the broken, the ostracized and ridiculed. God moves from chaos to order, from the other side to hope, from the edge to wholeness.

Isn't that part of our ministry as a church? To be salt and light? “Let your light shine” (Matthew 5:16). The land of Gerasene is dark, and there are many named Legion, where the demons roam. This is a vision that calls us to the other side of ourselves and also for all those others on the edge who are named chaos.

The prophet Isaiah said as much: "I have called you with righteous purpose and taken you by the hand, I have formed you, and appointed you to be a light to all peoples, a beacon for the nations, to open eyes that are blind, to bring captives out of prison, out of the dungeons where they lie in darkness...(Isaiah. 42:6-8a).

At one time or another we have to go there, we have to go to the other-side, out on the edge of darkness. And we hear God ask, “*What is your name?*” And we say it: chaos. But we don’t have to keep that name. God has come, to the edge, to the other side where we are to give us a new name – a child of God.

The man whose only name we know is chaos is now whole again and Jesus says stay home and tell them what the Lord has done for you. One author writes: *Yes, for you, the one they despised. For you, the one they imprisoned. For you, the one they banished. For you, the one they thought of as nothing. They may not want to listen. But tell them, if you can, that there is a God who embraces. A God whose arms reach out to all who are sent off, shut out, locked up, or chained down. A God who enfolds all who are enduring the deep, abiding terror of life on the edge. A God who has pulled you close, you who were beaten down and bewildered and told you were nothing.*

God has given you a new name and so when the question is asked: “What is your name?” We don’t have to say chaos. We can say we are a child of God. And God wants to claim you too.

None of the gospels tell us what happened to the man when he returned home. Was he accepted, received back to his family? Did they listen to his words when he told them all that the Lord and done for him? Some say you cannot go home again, but I believe that a day is coming when God will reach out once again to all of us on this side and the other side and bring us to a place called home. When chaos is renamed, we are home.

I still miss my grandmother very much. She died three years ago this month. I miss coming home to her house. I know I will never ever set foot in her kitchen again like I did so many times as a boy, and as a college student and later with my own family. But I sure can think of coming home and what it was like to smell chicken frying, biscuits buttered, and taste the sweet tea all over again. And when I think about this, I know that one day we will all get to go home again when God brings us back from the other side. I want you to be there with me. And I want our church to make sure we not leave anyone behind. There at God’s table wholeness will be felt, the lost will be found, chaos will be no more, and the feast will begin.