

“When Despair Meets Hope”

Luke 8:26-39

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“Once you choose hope, anything is possible,” Christopher Reeve once said. He was the actor who became a paraplegic after being thrown by a horse in an equestrian competition. For nine years, he showed us the difference hope can make when your life is turned upside down.

Our text today has something to say about hope as well. Let’s turn our attention toward it now.

Jesus and his disciples have been in Capernaum teaching and ministering to those who needed help. They decided to cross the Sea of Galilee and enter the Gentile region on the eastern frontier of the Roman Empire known as the Decapolis. For the most part, these ten cities were located in modern day Jordan.

Soon after landing, Jesus was approached by a man suffering with a mental illness who called out for help. This man was living in a cave because he was a risk to society.

Words cannot describe how miserable he must have been. He was cut off from family and friends and any semblance of normalcy. Furthermore, there appeared to be no hope for getting better.

Based upon what we know now about health, the Gerasene demoniac was mentally ill, and this was what made this miracle different from the other healing miracles Jesus had already performed. Up to this point, Jesus healed people who were struggling with physical ailments. They had leprosy or were blind, deaf, lame or paralyzed.

This man had none of these conditions. Instead, his problem revolved around his bizarre and violent behavior. This was such a mystery to his neighbors that the only diagnosis they could come up with was demon possession, a category reserved for all mystery illnesses.

Jesus treated him no differently from anyone else he encountered who was sick. He had compassion upon him and healed him, which leads to one of the most interesting parts of the

story. This man's "demons" were cast into a herd of swine, which ran over a cliff and drown in a lake.

Why did this happen? When Jesus healed someone with a physical problem, the change was obvious. Their sight was restored, or they were able to walk.

A cure for mental illness was another matter. How would the demoniac or his neighbors know if he was permanently healed? Too much was at risk not to know.

When the demoniac and the town folk saw the pigs run over the cliff and drown, they knew this man had been cured. He could safely return home and resume the life he once knew.

The story concludes with the man requesting to go with Jesus instead of going home. That's understandable. No one had been this good to him or done this much for him, and he wanted to follow Jesus out of gratitude and devotion.

However, Jesus told him to go home and tell others what God had done for him. I think I understand why. No testimony is more powerful than a changed life, and he needed to share with the people who had feared him so long what God had done for him through Jesus. If God loved him, a Gentile and demoniac, and responded to his plea for mercy, then God loved them, too, and would help them with their problems.

How does this story speak to us today? I pondered this question a lot last week.

To begin, it helps us to understand mental illness is as real as physical ailments and can be as debilitating. Thank goodness society is acknowledging this and addressing the needs of people struggling with anxiety, depression, phobias and a variety of crippling emotional disorders.

For too long, people have suffered in silence or been misunderstood if they talked about what was going on in their lives. The compassion Jesus showed the demoniac was no different from the attention he gave others who were suffering, and we should follow his example.

This story also speaks to us about hope, a hope which meets us at our lowest point of despair and helps us to find a better way forward. From my vantage point, I believe it does so in two ways.

As a believer, there is no situation I face, regardless of how bleak it seems, which cannot be made better if I reach out to God and others for help. I am alone only if I choose to be. Faith, family and friends can lift me out of the worst place I have ever been.

There is no shortage of fear, anxiety and disappointment in all of our lives. At times, we find ourselves where we never thought we would be and don't want to stay.

Sometimes this is due to the decisions we have made, and at other times it is beyond our control. Whatever the reason, the burden is heavy, and the pain is real.

What does our faith say about this? It tells us we are not alone, and there is no situation in life Christian hope cannot embrace and change for the better. As Christopher Reeve said during rehab, "Once you choose hope, anything is possible."

My Jewish friends tell me the only unforgivable sin is despair. Despair indicates hopelessness and hopelessness is to deny God. Who is to say what God can and cannot do? As Dr. John Claypool often said, "We don't know enough to be that negative. We don't know what will happen in the great not yet!"

What we do know is God loves us like responsible parents love their children, unconditionally and eternally. At all times and in all places, God is working behind the scenes to open doors of opportunity for us to pass through to a better life.

He will come where we are and grant us wisdom, understanding, strength, courage, confidence, patience and determination. He will take each step with us and guide us along our way. He will bring people into our lives who will be good role models and mentors. It is up to us, though, to open our lives, listen and begin that journey.

Just as Jesus met the Gerasene demoniac at his lowest point, so will he come to you and me. It is up to us to trust and follow him. I certainly hope you will.

This story speaks to me another way. As believers, there is no challenge in society we cannot meet and overcome if we join hearts and hands with God and each other. Working together, all things are possible.

This miracle sent a clear message to the citizens of this community that no problem they faced was unsolvable. If the most dangerous man they knew could be healed, all their other problems could be worked out, too.

It would require looking to God for help and pooling their talents and resources, but it could be done. They would have to make sacrifices and put the good of all above their personal pursuits, but it could be done. It would demand they choose the welfare of people over the profit of pigs, but it could be done.

The saddest part of this story occurred after the demoniac had been healed and returned to the community. Luke writes, "Then all the people of the surrounding country of the Gerasenes asked Jesus to leave them, for they were seized with great fear."

Of what were they afraid? Luke doesn't tell us, but wouldn't you like to know? I sure would.

First they were afraid of the demoniac, and then they were afraid of Jesus. What and who were they not afraid of?

Perhaps they were afraid if Jesus stayed around a little longer, they would lose more pigs as other people would surely be brought to him to be healed. I doubt this man was the only one who was "demon possessed." I suppose the price of caring for everybody was just too high.

Instead of asking Jesus to leave, what if they had asked him to stay and gathered the leaders and all the people together and asked Jesus to help them with other problems they were facing. If he could do this for one man, just think what he could do for the community as a whole. They could have picked his brain and had the finest training session on how to build healthy communities. But, they did not; they asked him to leave.

I pray we never make the same mistake. Too much is at stake.

Families, churches, schools, businesses, communities, states and nations are all facing overwhelming and intimidating challenges. Life is complicated and messy. Problems are increasing. Needs are going unmet. Society is broken.

What are we to do? For starters, don't ask Jesus to leave. Pray as you never have before and ask the Lord for wisdom and guidance. Begin this journey toward wholeness with the premise there is a better way forward, and we are going to find it.

Refuse to leave anyone behind, alone in their cave of despair. Don't consider anyone inferior or dispensable.

Put the common good above personal pursuits. Open your life to others and share stories and ideas on how to address problems. Offer the gifts, talents and resources you have to tackle tough challenges. Encourage those who get discouraged with your vision of a better day.

Most of all, don't let fear control you and run your life. Fear pushes Jesus and others out of your life. Fear undermines your confidence and convinces you to settle for less than your best. Therefore, be bold and courageous in the face of adversity, compassionate and generous.

I've told you how this story speaks to me. **How does it speak to you this morning?** Where does it intersect your life? What is it calling you to do?

Is it time for you to make a bad situation better by reaching out to God and others who can bring the best out in you?

Is it time for you to join hearts and hands with other believers in our church to meet the needs of people in our own community?

Remember what Christopher Reeve said, "Once you choose hope, anything is possible."

Ask God to help you choose hope.