

Isaiah 65:1-9, 22-31; Psalm 22:18-27
Galatians 3:23-29; Luke 8:26-39

Grace to you all and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Well here we are. It is June twentieth. It is Father's Day (thanks to all you faithful dads on this day), school is finally out for everybody (I see a few smiles), and vacation season is now in full swing. This year, even my family celebrated the end of the school year and Father's Day by taking a bit of a vacation. You see, seminary students don't get much time off, but we were fortunate to be able to go to Niagara Falls this past week.

My wife Jessica made all the arrangements and saw to all the details. She booked hotel rooms, scheduled us on tours of the area (including a ride on the "Maid of the Mist" boat that came close to the waterfalls), and picked the days and times for our travel to and from Gettysburg. On Tuesday morning we loaded the car. My job was to simply drive the car. Jessica read the maps and kept me pointed in the right direction. Our four children, during the time on the road, were simply along for the ride – their job was to fight the boredom of a long car trip.

After about six hours of travel, we finally came to the "Rainbow Bridge" that crosses the Niagara River from the United States to Canada. Here's a question for you: Why did the Behenna's cross the bridge? Answer one: To get to the other side. Answer two: Because Jessica said so.

We checked into our hotel and quickly learned that we should head for an area called "Clifton Hill" which offered parking, places to eat, and easy access to the falls themselves. It turns out that Clifton Hill is a street lined with all of the familiar fast-food restaurants we know well here in the States. Wedged in between the restaurants are a number of T-shirt and gift shops – you know them – these places exist anywhere tourists are to be found. But the most noticeable storefronts in Niagara Falls these days are the haunted houses. There is place after place along Clifton Hill inviting the traveler to enter and experience all kinds of demonic things from Frankenstein's monster to wax reproductions of modern-day mass-murderers. The fascination people had with demonic things in a place known for catering to honeymoon couples struck me. Then I remembered that I live in Gettysburg, a place known for catering to history buffs, but also a place where the fastest growing industry is tours of haunted houses ... including the house where my family lives.

Anyway, after walking the length of that odd street, we came at last to the famous Niagara Falls. I stood there on the Canadian side and watched the water beautifully crash and churn. My mind turned to our gospel lesson today.

Jesus had been out on a boat in a body of water that separated Galilee from the lands of the Geresenes. The disciples were with him in the boat ... they were simply along for the ride at that point. Question one: Why did the disciples cross the lake? Answer one: To get to the other side. Answer two: Because Jesus said so.

Jesus and His disciples landed on the side of the lake opposite of Galilee. They were no longer in Jewish territory; rather, they were in the land of the Gentiles. The first person Jesus encountered was a man who was possessed by many demons. This man was running around without clothes, he was hiding and living in the local cemetery, and the local folks had been trying to control him by putting him in chains and locking shackles around his ankles. The man was so crazed that he somehow gained the strength to break the chains and shackles. The townsfolk took turns guarding him to make sure he stayed safely away from their homes and remained among the tombs of the dead.

Jesus walked right up to this man and asked his name. “Legion” was the answer. People of the first century would have understood this term as referring to a Roman legion that consisted of about 5,600 fighting men ... the implication is that this man was possessed by nearly 6,000 demons! Jesus commanded the demons to leave the man, but the evil spirits ask to be allowed to enter a herd of nearby pigs. Jesus allows this ... the demons enter the pigs ... and a new recipe is created ... this is the first recorded case of deviled ham! (I'm just kidding!) The pigs then stampede into the sea and drown. Standing along the Niagara River on Wednesday, I could imagine pigs with red eyes dropping into the gorge below me ... it was not a pretty thought.

On a serious note, I must admit that this Bible story is difficult to explain in modern terms. We no longer understand our world in terms of demons and evil spirits. Instead, we think of our troubles in the world in terms physical and mental illnesses. We explain the existence of evil in our world by societal factors and by the influence that evil leaders can exert on an unsuspecting nation or group of people. We hear of Jesus walking among the people of the first century and curing them of ailments and casting out demons, but few of us expect to find Jesus doing the same among us in our time. And this morning, we hear of flying demon-possessed pigs that drown themselves ... and then we hear nothing about the demons again. What did it mean when demons were drowned? Little about this story seems relevant to us in the twenty-first century.

But think again. If you get past all the strange images that made sense to people 2,000 years ago, you begin to hear about how the people dealt with the events of their day. The people hurried out of their towns to come to see what had happened to the man who lived among the tombs. What they found was a calm man, now well dressed, sitting at Jesus’ feet. He was learning from the master. That man once known as “Legion” had become a disciple of Jesus.

There was no wonder or joy expressed because of this remarkable transformation. Instead, the people were filled with fear. They understood how to deal with the demon-possessed man when he was at his worst. They had organized themselves to take care of the threat he posed. As long as he was corralled in the graveyard there was no threat to the town. But now everything had changed. The wild naked man who tore chains in two was now a model citizen. The rest of the people might have feared that the legion of demons that once lived inside the man might now be loose to threaten their town. One thing was sure ... the demons had entered their prize farm animals. But now the pigs were all dead and lying at the bottom of the lake. How were they to find a source of food and income in the coming year? Who was this man Jesus and why did he change everything so dramatically? Should the people of the Geresenes consider what Jesus did to their livestock to be an act of war? Did this man from Galilee intend to wipe out their civilization by destroying all of their food supply? They were afraid and they did not want to wait for answers. They simply wanted Jesus to go away and leave them alone. They begged him to go away.

Doesn't this sound like something we encounter every day? When modern-day Christians go out into the world to tell of the great transforming difference Jesus can make in our lives, don't we sometimes meet people with the same fears that Jesus found among the Geresenes? Folks are afraid that public institutions might be threatened or altered if Jesus' teachings become more widespread. Others are afraid that their line of work may no longer be available to them if the world were to change its ways. After all, many people think that changing what we do changes who we are. It scares us to have to deal with change. It is human nature to resist change. We *fear* change. But following Jesus demands change. Following Jesus means overcoming our fears so that we may be transformed. By this transformation, fear is put to death and we are given a new life in freedom. Said another way, our fears are driven out like a demon-possessed herd of pigs headed for a cliff when we choose to follow Jesus rather than to slavishly follow the "norms" of the society in which we live.

Our gospel lesson ends in a curious way. The man who had been saved from his many demons asks if he may go with Jesus. Here is your last question this morning. Why did the man *not* cross the water? Answer one: So that he would *not* get to the other side. Answer two: Because Jesus told him *not* to go.

Jesus told the man to return to his own hometown and tell every one what *God* had done for him. This man, now the model of peace, went to the entire city and told everyone what *Jesus* had done for him. This man, once the ultimate outcast in his own Gentile society, became the first of Jesus' disciples sent to those same Gentile people. For that man, following Jesus meant he must proclaim the gospel close to home. We still don't know the man's name, but we do know that his message eventually inspired legions of others (we count ourselves among them).

Today, at the end of our time together, I will have the opportunity to say, "Go out into the world bearing the love of Christ!" You will be asked to respond with, "Thanks be to God!" Many of you will add the words, "We will!" Legions of God's people in our own hometowns may depend on us to keep this weekly promise. Let us live out our joyful promise by going out in the world and proclaiming what Jesus has done for us just as that nameless man did so long ago.

Amen.

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