

“Reaction”

“Then all the people of the surrounding country of the Gerasenes asked Jesus to leave them; for they were seized with great fear.”

Does that strike you as a strange reaction? It did strike me that way at first reading. But the more I thought about it, the more I realized that fear makes people react in ways they normally would not.

Put yourself in their shoes (something I think we should do regularly with any Biblical text). We live in towns and cities that number in the thousand and tens of thousands; people in Jesus’ day lived in villages of hundreds. I don’t really know the neighbors whose properties abut my own. I rarely see them; our schedules and technology keep us away from one another. One of the impacts of technology in the age of computers — even with the advent of so-called “social media — is the diminishing of human contact. Other technologies (for instance, air conditioning that keeps us indoors on even mildly warm days) have added to this impact.

I see some neighbors on some schooldays as the mother takes their children down the street to where the bus will pick him up — but they are in the car and so am I, so a wave is the limit of our socialization. I see the neighbor across from us on rare occasions when he is out getting his sports car ready to convey to another car show. We’ve had a bit more contact with our next-door neighbor who is the latest to move in . . . but our primary contact with her has been when the dogs were in the back yard. I am convinced that the neighbors behind us consider me to be a “second-story man” ever since I helped get her into the house by picking the lock on the door from their garage into their family room (a trick I had learned on my parents’ home when I was in college).

I am well aware that many of you are much more tuned in to your neighborhoods — it seems to come with the territory if your kids grew up in that neighborhood; they brought a kind of natural cohesion. Some of you are just more friendly (more extroverted?) than I. Maybe there are

some of you who choose to be even less attuned to your neighbors — the one with the barking dog at all hours of the night; the ones whose son revs his engine for hours on end, sending up billows of blue and grey smoke into your yard; the neighbor who has not painted his house in thirty years, or who painted it pulsating orange and chartreuse just to peeve everyone else on the street.

Now, I have confessed to this rather dismal record of a lack neighborliness not just to make you feel better about how much better you are, but to point out that, in Jesus' day, everyone knew not only their neighbors, but every person in town. Therefore, the man in today's Gospel who was demon-possessed was well-known to them. Perhaps he was viewed as an oddity, best kept at a distance; he may have been perceived as a threat, a danger to himself and others. How many of them would have spent time offering up prayers for him? Or trying to see to it that he had proper food and shelter? . . . I'm going to guess . . . none.

Just two weeks ago we heard of the young man of Nain being raised from the dead. The people in that town knew him and his widowed mother — indeed many were in the crowd of mourners that day. Recall their reaction: ***“Fear seized all of them; and [yet] they glorified God, saying, ‘A great prophet has risen among us!’ and ‘God has looked favorably on his people!’”*** Think about the reaction of Simon the Pharisee to the events in last week's Gospel, as a woman Simon labeled a “sinner” washed Jesus' feet with her tears, dried them with her hair, and anointed them. No fear was expressed; only disdain. After his conversation with Jesus, Luke does not record Simon's reaction (perhaps because there was none, or at least no change from his prior expressions). The people at table with Jesus express astonishment that He deigns to forgive sins, but it sounds less like *“Oooh wow!”* and more like *“And just who does he think he is?”* Now, in this instance of exorcism, fear seems to drive people to want to get rid of Jesus. Is this because people are that much more afraid of evil supernaturalism than they are of even death?

Death, especially in an agrarian society, was a common experience;

demons are not. Our culture, of course, tends to dismiss the demonic as nothing more than misdiagnosis of mental illness. That theory suggests that the ancients did not have any concept of chemical imbalances or brain disorders or anything like that, and so they chalked up what they saw as demonization. It may be true that some of what was assumed to be demonic was in fact something like epilepsy. It is certainly true that the people of Jesus' time held to a totally different worldview in which the spiritual — both evil and good — was not disregarded, but assumed. There is a certain hubris in our culture's attitude toward those "primitive" ideas to which we would do well to give heed.

It comes down to this: Do we believe . . . no, let me rephrase that: Is it not only true for you that there are such things at work in our world as demons, and is that also real for you? We have this habit of nodding our heads to things and ideas that we have been told since childhood we should embrace as true. So we do. We acknowledge that intellectually we can agree with that statement. But the statement does not correspond to what actually goes on in our lives, and so for us it is not real.

If you have never experienced racial abuse, you may agree that it is awful and should not be allowed to exist; but you yourself have no frame of reference to what that means in your life. Your life has been spared that indignity. You can only imagine what it must be like (and most of the time your imagination is not that vital!).

If you have never had an ecstatic experience of the presence of God, you may agree with the statement, "*God exists,*" but that statement has little more impact on your understanding of God than does the statement, "*Kumquats are orange.*" Your reaction to the latter may be "*So what?*" Is your life appreciably better, or even different, because you know that kumquats are orange? I doubt it.

But how do you react to "*God exists.*"? With a challenge, or "*I'm not so sure*"? That would, of course, not be a reaction, but a response. The reaction is the gut feeling as you hear those words. What feeling — not thought or idea — goes through you as you contemplate the presence of

God? Fear? (“*He’s watching you!*”) Indifference? Delight? Joy? Anger?

I forget the author who penned the story of the woman who all her adult life had pooh-poohed the very idea of God. One day, her daughter was severely injured in a serious auto accident, and as she drove to the emergency room to be by her side she was screaming and yelling at God about the injustice of this and her anger that He had allowed this to happen to her daughter — and in the midst of her tirade she heard a voice say to her, “*It’s so nice to hear you talking to me again.*”

“*Pastor, are you telling that we have to now hear voices?*” No, although I am convinced that some people do actually hear from God — not in audible tones that another could overhear if in the vicinity, but as an inner voice. And I have sat with people who have invited Jesus to draw near and actually heard from Him the very thing that brought them healing and restoration out of brokenness and wounding. So, I guess I am saying that you need to be open to the possibility that God does speak, and may choose to do so with you.

I am not, I repeat NOT, saying or even implying that hearing is better, makes you a better person, or shows that God likes you more. Can we at least entertain the possibility that God wants to come to us in deeply intimate ways? Yet, as this account plays out, we find the previously-demonized man, as Luke records it, “***sitting at the feet of Jesus, clothed and in his right mind.***” [We often assure people who come for the first time to one of the Formational Prayer Seminars, and who express some misgivings about what might happen, that they will most certainly leave the event “clothed and in their right minds.”]

The villagers had not witnessed the actual exorcism; the swineherds who saw it reported the events to them. I have to wonder what was the reaction of those swineherds as they watched their entire herd race headlong over a cliff. Do you imagine that their reporting to the folks in town might have had a slightly negative slant to it?

But, although the villagers did not see the actual event, the evidence of

the change in this man was enough to induce fear. Fear that Jesus might be a danger to them as He had been to the swine and their owners? Fear that, if Jesus had this kind of power, you could not trust — or control — how He might use it? Fear that here was something they could not readily explain, so best get rid of it? The man himself wanted nothing more than to stay with Jesus — when He is that real for you that is a common reaction.

Now right here is where we need to pay particular attention: I am sure that every fiber of this man's being longed for Jesus to wrap His arms around him and invite him to walk with Him. That is not what Jesus does. Instead He tells the man, ***“Return to your home, and declare how much God has done for you.”*** I have no basis in the text, but I am absolutely convinced that this man was crestfallen at these words — his reaction had to have been disappointment and longing. But what did he do? ***“. . . he went away, proclaiming throughout the city how much Jesus had done for him.”***

And this is the lesson we must learn. God does draw near to us, and wants to come ever closer. Your best reaction will be, *“More, Lord. More.”* And when you have the “more” your reaction may well be to try to hold onto it, bask in it, enjoy it. But Jesus bids you to go back into your daily routines, and there to make known ***“how much God has done for you.”*** There are many ways by which you can react to the presence of God — some more helpful and healthy than others. What finally matters is, not how you react, but how you respond when Jesus bids you go in His name.

It has been pointed out that, like many others to whom Jesus brought healing and wholeness, this man continues to be known as “the Gaddarean Demoniak.” He hasn't been a demoniac for over 2,000 years. He carries that designation because that is the context out of which God's grace intersected him. The point of his greatest need became the place of his greatest healing.

And so it is offered to you — wherever you have experienced loss, hurt,

pain, suffering, disappointment, betrayal, brokenness, or rupture, it is just there that God want to meet you. Luther understood this; he reminds us in the final stanza of his famous hymn: *“Though devils all the world should fill, All eager to devour us — We tremble not, we fear no ill, They cannot overpower us. This world’s prince may still Scowl fierce as he will; He can harm us none — He’s judged; the deed is done: One little word can fell him.”*

For Luther, this was that “one little word” was this: *“I am baptized.’ What can the devil do to me?”* May that be both our reaction and our response.

Amen.