

Sermon: How much has God done for you?

Today we begin what is sometimes called the “non-festival half” of the church year. And that makes some sense. If you think where we’ve been since November, we’ve been through Advent and had the festival worship services around Christmas and Epiphany, and then Lent with the high festivals around Jesus’ death and resurrection with Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and Easter. And finally, we just had our services surrounding Pentecost and Holy Trinity Sunday.

All those festivals and celebrations, largely surrounding the life and salvation-work of Jesus, take us from late November through early June. Now we are in the stretch of the church year, the Sundays after Pentecost, where there really aren’t festivals, at least not major ones.

Instead of spending time celebrating the big moments in Jesus’ ministry and work to save us, we’ll be spending time slowing down and walking with Jesus during the somewhat quieter moments of his ministry. We’ll see his compassion as he heals the sick and learn from his wisdom with the disciples as he teaches small groups and large crowds, ever focusing them and us on himself as the only solution to our sins.

Jesus went across the Sea of Galilee to the Gerasenes. This was out of Jewish territory; it was a place inhabited by Gentiles. The exact location of this area is up for some debate, but we know it must have been a coastal area because as soon as Jesus puts a foot on the sand, things start to happen:

When Jesus stepped ashore, a man from the town met him. He was possessed by demons and for a long time had not worn any clothes. He did not live in a house but in the tombs. A naked man, tormented by demons, who lived in the local equivalent of a cemetery, comes up to Jesus. Upon seeing Jesus, the man (or more accurately, the evil spirits within him) cry out in fear, “What do I have to do with you, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I beg you, don’t torment me!”

It's fascinating that these demons can see in Jesus what no one else could. This Jesus was no normal human being. He was God-in-flesh. And these demons in this man instantly recognize that this Jesus has the power to do things to them they would find very unpleasant, to torment them, returning them to the abyss, which seems to be another word for hell.

We don't really have a clear understanding of the supernatural forces at work here. What does it mean for a demon to be roaming the earth or in a man (or pig) compared to being in hell? This account raises many more questions about the working of the spiritual forces around us than it answers. But that is not the point of our focus this morning.

No matter how much these demons did not want to have anything happen to them, in the end the best they could do was bargain with the Son of the Most High God.

We're told, "the demons begged Jesus to let them go into the pigs, and he gave them permission." Permission. Fascinating, isn't it? Something like demons and hell and all these things, whether it's our own imagination or movies and books, or even accounts in the Bible, can seem so scary, so powerful, so unnerving. But what do we learn here? Nothing is beyond the control of God. Every force, power, or being, no matter how daunting or dangerous, must submit themselves to the God who created and rules all things.

At Jesus permission and command, the demons flee the man and enter the heard of pigs and drove them off the hillside into the water. What does this all mean for the man living naked and among the tombs?

People went out to see what had happened. They came to Jesus and found the man from whom the demons had gone out, sitting at Jesus' feet. He was clothed and in his right mind, and the people were afraid.

Can you even imagine what it was like for this man? We have no idea how long he endured this demon possession other than Luke's comment, "for a

long time.” This wasn’t something that had happened for days or weeks or even months; this was probably years of suffering under this burden. And then, in an instant, Jesus solves it with just his word.

The people around were scared of Jesus, but not the man. It’s not clear if he would have known anything about Jesus before that moment, but the demons’ testimony about Jesus let him know who Jesus was. And Jesus’ words were powerful to create faith in this man’s heart. The miracle demonstrated beyond a shadow of a doubt that Jesus was not someone to fear, but someone to praise.

This man wanted to be one of Jesus’ disciples, to continue to be with him. As Jesus got into the boat and started back, the man from whom the demons had gone out begged to be with him. This fledgling faith just wants to be near Jesus, which is more than understandable. But Jesus had other plans.

This man, this likely-Gentile man, would not be one of the twelve, or even one of the broader group of disciples who would travel with Jesus around Galilee and Judea. No, instead Jesus gave him a different, more personal directive: “Return to your home and tell how much God has done for you.”

There are times during Jesus’ ministry that we see him tell people to be quiet about the miracles or things he’s done, largely because people might get the wrong idea about his goals and purpose. But not here. Here Jesus very directly tells this man to be a witness, tell others what God had done for him. And what a powerful message he had to share. His suffering was very, very public so the miracle also was very, very public. Jesus had rescued him from this slavery to the minions of hell and he would never forget it.

You and I probably have not lived through the physical torment that this man did, but we all have God’s care in our lives. Maybe we can point to some very specific times where God made his intervention pretty clear safety in a near certain car accident, healing from a disease that surprised

the doctors, daily bread coming to us in dire times from an unexpected place.

But even if we don't have some specific story from our lives to share, we all have the rescue that God gives not from demon possession, but from hell itself. Because for as bad as that man's torment by the demons was, we saw that even the demons didn't want to be sent back to hell. And by our own work, we're in the same place as they were. We are terrified of what God will do to us because of our sins—because we know that our sins have earned that eternal death in hell.

But Jesus enters, not to torment, but to save. He has mercy on us. He doesn't just lessen the hardship like he did for the demons, allowing us to be sent into whatever our equivalent of a heard of unclean pigs might be. No, he completely saves us from the hardship, completely saves from hell.

He uses his word again to assure us of this, when from the cross he declared his work finished. He suffered hell in our place, died the death we should have died, to ensure that we were saved. Not just from earthly strife and torment, but from eternal suffering.

And beyond that, Jesus' words create faith to trust him as Savior. The Word of God creates trust in everything God has said and done. Our faith is a quiet confidence that knows that our Savior is trustworthy.

As a result, we long to be away from this world of sin and decay and instead to be with Jesus. We want to go where he goes and always have him clearly, visibly with us. And surely, by his grace, we will do that when the time for our departure from this life arrives. But until that time he looks each of us in the eye and says, "Return to your home and tell how much God has done for you."

May God give each of us that same heart and mind. Today, and every day, as you return home and everywhere you find yourselves, tell how much God has done for you. Amen.