

Bible Study Guide: Week of 6-13-2022

1. Read through the passage below
2. Read my notes and commentary
3. Read the questions at the end and ponder or discuss with others

Pastor Andrew

Luke 8:26-39

²⁶Then [Jesus and his disciples] arrived at the country of the Gerasenes, which is opposite Galilee. ²⁷As [Jesus] stepped out on land, a man of the city who had demons met him. For a long time he had worn no clothes, and he did not live in a house but in the tombs. ²⁸When he saw Jesus, he fell down before him and shouted at the top of his voice, “What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I beg you, do not torment me”—²⁹for Jesus had commanded the unclean spirit to come out of the man. (For many times it had seized him; he was kept under guard and bound with chains and shackles, but he would break the bonds and be driven by the demon into the wilds.) ³⁰Jesus then asked him, “What is your name?” He said, “Legion”; for many demons had entered him. ³¹They begged him not to order them to go back into the abyss. ³²Now there on the hillside a large herd of swine was feeding; and the demons begged Jesus to let them enter these. So he gave them permission. ³³Then the demons came out of the man and entered the swine, and the herd rushed down the steep bank into the lake and was drowned. ³⁴When the swineherds saw what had happened, they ran off and told it in the city and in the country. ³⁵Then people came out to see what had happened, and when they came to Jesus, they found the man from whom the demons had gone sitting at the feet of Jesus, clothed and in his right mind. And they were afraid. ³⁶Those who had seen it told them how the one who had been possessed by demons had been healed. ³⁷Then all the people of the surrounding country of the Gerasenes asked Jesus to leave them; for they were seized with great fear. So he got into the boat and returned. ³⁸The man from whom the demons had gone begged that he might be with him; but Jesus sent him away, saying, ³⁹“Return to your home, and declare how much God has done for you.” So he went away, proclaiming throughout the city how much Jesus had done for him.

²⁶Then [Jesus and his disciples] arrived at the country of the Gerasenes, which is opposite Galilee.

Jesus has crossed from Galilee, on the Western or Northwestern coast of the Sea of Galilee to “the other side” of the sea. There are numerous textual variants here for Jesus’ destination. The one the NRSV has chosen is “the region around the Gerasenes” or the region around Gerasa/Jerash. Jerash was a leading city of the Decapolis—the Gentile region on the Southeastern side of the Sea of Galilee. The city of Jerash itself was some 30 miles from the sea in the region along the eastern bank of the Jordan River. Though the “region around the Geresenes” might stretch all the way from Jerash to the Sea of Galilee, one commentator named Joseph Fitzmyer pointed out that “the stampede of the pigs from Gerasa to the Lake would have made them the most energetic herd in history!” Indeed, the story as it is written makes no sense if we envision it taking place in Gerasa proper. Jesus was confronted by the demoniac “as soon as he stepped on land.” Such an encounter would not have been possible in Gerasa proper, given the 30 mile distance from the coast.

Other possible places referenced include Gadara, a smaller city only 6 miles from the sea also on the Southeastern side and Gergesa, modern-day Kursi, in the Golan Heights on the Eastern shore of the Sea of Galilee. Gadara is closer to the sea, but still difficult to imagine due to the distance from the sea. Gergasa was, by all accounts, right on the coast. Thus, this story is often called “The Gerasene Demoniac,” “The Gadarene Demoniac,” or “The Gergesene Demoniac” depending on which location is favored. Gergesa probably makes the most sense as I said above, given its seaside location. The other two towns are miles away from the sea. Luke’s phrase “the region around,” however, makes it possible that Luke was referring not to the towns of Gerasa or Gadera, but rather to the Southeastern side of the Sea of Galilee in a regional sense. The reference to “a man of the city” in v. 27 makes this unlikely; Luke seems

to assume a coastal city location, making Gergesa the most probable location in terms of common sense. In terms of the manuscript tradition, the most reliable manuscripts of Luke's gospel favor Gerasa instead.

Practically speaking, however, it hardly matters where this exorcism and healing occurred. The point is not so much geographical as theological. Jesus went to "the other side of the sea," that is, the gentile side of the sea. Regardless of where along the shore this miracle happened, the true miracle is that Jesus' power extended even over demons in Gentile communities.

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This whole passage is steeped in ritual impurity. As I noted above, the region was heavily Gentile (i.e. ritually unclean, from a 1st Century Jewish perspective). The man dwells among corpses in the tombs, making him ritually impure. Further, this is a region in which pigs—unclean animals—are kept. Jesus' power over the unclean spirits that possess the man is matched by his willingness to travel into an unclean area to minister to an unclean person with unclean spirits and amidst unclean animals.

The spirits that possess the man endow him with supernatural strength. Their power and might would not have been lost on the original hearers of this gospel who were only too familiar with Roman legions. A typical Roman legion would have around 5,000 soldiers. You can imagine how frightening this possession must have been for the man and the community. Yet Jesus has no issue commanding and subduing the Legion of spirits in the man. This follows on the heels of Jesus' mastery over the wind and waves during a storm at sea. The sea was considered the watery abyss from which evil spirits came, hence the spirits' reluctance to go back into the sea and their eventual plunge into the abyss while inhabiting the pigs.

³⁵Then people came out to see what had happened, and when they came to Jesus, they found the man from whom the demons had gone sitting at the feet of Jesus, clothed and in his right mind. And they were afraid. ³⁶Those who had seen it told them how the one who had been possessed by demons had been healed. ³⁷Then all the people of the surrounding country of the Gerasenes asked Jesus to leave them; for they were seized with great fear. So he got into the boat and returned.

As if to illustrate how accustomed to the demon-possessed man's wild behavior the people of the region had become, seeing him calm, clothed, and sane causes the people fear. Confronted with a power greater than the power of the demons causes the people to insist that Jesus leave at once. Luke does not tell us whether Jesus' trip across the sea was for the express purpose of healing this demon-possessed gentile, but because Jesus listens to the people and goes back across the sea, that is the effect. Again, both this story and the preceding story of Jesus' calming the storm serve to highlight Jesus' power over nature and the demonic.

³⁸The man from whom the demons had gone begged that he might be with him; but Jesus sent him away, saying, ³⁹"Return to your home, and declare how much God has done for you." So he went away, proclaiming throughout the city how much Jesus had done for him.

This formerly demon-possessed man becomes one of the first gentile witnesses to Jesus' ministry. It is curious that Jesus does not allow the man to follow him. Whether this is because of cultural differences or because Jesus knew the man's witness would be more powerful in his own region or for some other reason we don't know. In any case, the man obeys Jesus' command and responds in faith and gratitude for the healing Jesus performed on his behalf.

Discussion/Reflection Questions:

- 1. Why do you think Jesus crossed the sea to a gentile area? Was it just to meet and heal this man?**
- 2. Why do you think the people were so afraid and insisted that Jesus leave them at once?**
- 3. Why do you think Jesus refused to let the man stay with him?**