

Jesus Confronts the Powers of Legion

Text: Mark 5:1-20

Date: January 30, 2022

Present the text (with a little commentary; Jesus is in Gentile territory)

Testimony

- I've had interactions with the demonic, etc.

The Existence of The Powers

- Get out of your mind the images of angels and demons you grew up, you saw in cartoons, or are sitting on your grandma's bookshelf. (Go to Google images and search for biblically accurate angels)

Hebrew Bible

- gods, angels, demons, satan
- Early Israelite religion was not monotheistic but Henotheistic, one god above all others; even the first commandment, "You shall have no other gods before me")
 - Daniel 10 - Prince of Persia preventing prayer
 - Council of the gods - Psalm 82
 - Common understanding that each nation had their own "local deity"
 - Israel declared that their local deity Yahweh ruled over all of them

Between the two testaments

Jews became strict monotheists. Language around the invisible rulers and powers changed.

New Testament

The NT uses different language, but it's getting at the same Jewish notions

- Romans 8, "I'm convinced that nothing can separate us from God's love...not angels or rulers; nor powers."
- Ephesians 3, "God's purpose is now, through the church, to show the rulers and powers in the heavens the rich variety of God's wisdom."
- Ephesians 6, "We aren't fighting against human enemies but against rulers, authorities, forces of cosmic darkness, and spiritual powers of evil in the heavens."
- Colossians 1, "The Son is the image of the invisible God, the one who is first over all creation Because all things were created by him: both in the heavens and on the earth, the things that are visible and the things that are invisible. Whether they are thrones or powers, or rulers or authorities, all things were created through him and for him."
- 1 Peter 3, "Your salvation comes through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who is at God's right side. Now that he has gone into heaven, he rules over all angels, authorities, and powers."

What are the Powers?

- Again, not entities floating around in the sky?
 - Not a separate invisible reality that may or may not interact with our physical one. Rather:

The Powers, unfortunately, have long since been identified as an order of angelic beings in heaven, or as demons flapping about in the sky. Most people have simply consigned them to the dustbin of superstition. Others, sensing the tremendous potential in the concept of the Powers for interpreting social reality, have identified them without remainder as institutions, structures, and systems. The Powers certainly are the latter, but they are more, and it is that "more" that holds the clue to their profundity. In the biblical view they are both visible and invisible, earthly and heavenly, spiritual and institutional. The Powers possess an outer, physical manifestation (buildings, portfolios, personnel, trucks, fax machines) and an inner spirituality, or corporate culture, or collective personality. The Powers are the simultaneity of an outer,

visible structure and an inner, spiritual reality. The Powers, properly speaking, are not just the spirituality of institutions, but their outer manifestations as well.

Walter Wink. *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination* (Kindle Locations 110-114). Kindle Edition.

- Examples: Corporate Culture; the Spirit of a Nation; New York State of Mind; a Riot after a sporting event
- This affects how we see Jesus' mission.
 - Not about confronting individuals sin, sickness, etc. But rather the entire systems (demons, angels, gods) that made it so.
 - In the first century Jewish and Christian imagination, Sin is not only something we *do*. Sin is a Power that has been defeated by Christ. Death is not merely something that happens to our bodies. It's a Power that has been defeated by Jesus.

Axioms

- Science Mike Axioms
 - **Prayer** is *at least* a form of meditation that encourages the development of healthy brain tissue, that reduces stress, and that can connect us to God. *Even if* that is a comprehensive definition of prayer, the health and psychological benefits of prayer justify the discipline.
 - **Sin** is *at least* volitional action or inaction that violates human consent or produces human suffering. Sin comes from the divergent impulses between our lower and higher brain functions and our evolution-driven tendency to do things that serve ourselves and our tribe. *Even if* this is all sin is, it is destructive and threatens human flourishing.
- **The Powers** (gods, angels, demons, principalities, and spirits) are *at least* the systemic social and cultural forces that both emerge from and animate organizations, corporations, nations, and other groups of people. *Even if* that is a comprehensive definition of The Powers, it is essential to identify these Powers so they may be critiqued, reformed, or exorcised.

Why does it matter that we get this right?

Language creates perception

When I was kid, I had a black and white TV. Used to think that people in olden times didn't see color, only black and white.

This is kind of true. There used to be not a word for the color blue in Greek, Icelandic, Hebrew, Japanese, Indian, Chinese.

It seems like ancient people couldn't even see it.

A test was done on with the Himba tribe in Namibia. Don't have a word for blue. But lots of words for Green.

This image (of all blue boxes but one green): couldn't see which one was blue.

This image (of all green boxes): they could tell which one was different.

Sapir-Whorf hypothesis or Linguistic Relativity: the structure of a language affects its speakers' worldview or cognition, and thus people's perceptions are relative to their spoken language.

The relevance of the Powers for an understanding of structural evil should by now begin to be clear. Any attempt to transform a social system without addressing both its spirituality and its outer forms is doomed to failure. Only by confronting the spirituality of an institution and its concretions can the total entity be transformed, and that requires a kind of spiritual discernment and praxis that the materialistic ethos in which we live knows nothing about. (Wink)

It is not a coincidence that a society incapable of being conscious of angels, demons, and the invisible Powers, is also incapable of confronting Racism, cis-hetero-patriarchal-normativity, Economic Greed, Toxic Capitalism, Consumerism, Individualistic Freedom at all costs, Militarism, and the myth of Redemptive Violence.

Western culture has the fewest words for "the spiritual realm," yet our culture is most affected by depression, addiction, anxiety, suicide, and mental illness.

Back to Jesus:

Whenever Jesus confronts someone possessed by a demon, we should not read this as if a little invisible monster is using the human as a free horse or hotel and Jesus has to kick it off somehow.

Rather, Jesus is confronting the corrupted powers of that world, and the hold that they have on communities, villages, neighborhoods, nations, and, yes, individuals.

- I don't hold to the theory that demon-possessed people in the New Testament are just mentally-ill people.
 - First, that's an insult to mentally-ill people. Creates all sorts of bad theology around mental-illness.
 - Second, it's more accurate to see it as first-century people's way of understanding when someone became totally corrupted by a culture's illness (even imposed by others).
 - Demon-possession language was also a form of scapegoating; i.e. the village placing all of their ills onto a single person. The man possessed by Legion is sent away. But, of course, all of the Mediterranean world was possessed by Legions of Rome. They just inflicted the blame on the one.
- Jesus is confronting not just one possessed person. But rather Rome itself.
 - A man possessed with a demon named Legion saying, "We are many" is as subtle as a man being possessed by a demon named Red Hat saying, "We are MAGA."

"How can the possessive demonic presence called Legion, the occupying presence that wrought the bitter pathology of oppression and sought to remain in possession of the country, not the man, be anything but the Roman military?"

Obery Hendricks, "Guerrilla Exegesis: A Post Modern Proposal for Insurgent African American Biblical Interpretation," *JITC* 22.

- This way of seeing the world opens up the possibility that we are all implicated in the corruptive ways the Powers can affect us.
 - How are we possessed or corrupted by the demonic lie of White Supremacy; of Hustle Culture and Toxic Capitalism; Ableism and insipid

forms of Eugenics; Sexism and Patriarchy; White Christian Nationalism?

- When I say these things are demonic or satanic, what I don't mean is that mean little monsters are poking at our brains to make us into bad people.
- What I do mean is that out corporations, organizations, churches, religions, countries, states, and cities emerge spirits, demons, and false gods. And then those demons in turn perpetuate and give energy to the concrete corporations, groups, political parties, churches, and people. It's a cycle that, without God's intervention, becomes vicious and destructive.
- Finally, I want you to note how Jesus' freeing of someone angers the community. They send Jesus the liberator away. This man's freedom comes at economic cost (goodbye piggies). And that cost is considered too high by the community. This is precisely what happens when those animated by the Divine Spirit of liberation and freedom confronts those who are possessed by the corruptive Powers.
- We see this cycle happen over and over again when American deals with race.

"I see a black and white parallel here. As long as we were struggling in the cotton fields of Tennessee, Georgia, Alabama, and Mississippi with our cotton sacks across our shoulders and to our sides, picking cotton and having our fingers burning from stinging cotton worms that would hide under the cotton leaves; as long as we were barefoot, actually and symbolically, laughing when we were not tickled...America was satisfied...But one day America saw us marching to the voting booth, sitting down at lunch counters, and all of America became afraid.

"Otis Moss, "Going from Grace to Dignity," in Preaching the Gospel, ed. Henry J. Young (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976),

Tying it All Together

Main Idea: Every aspect of our society has both concrete and invisible realities that need to be named. Scripture calls this The Powers. Jesus heals us from The Powers that corrupt us and our world and sets us a mission to do the same.

Gospel/Good News: The Powers do not have the last word; they will not succeed in the end; they will be redeemed and restored. God will not only liberate us from the Powers, but will liberate the Powers as well.

Invitation: To receive the healing power of Jesus.

Challenge: Our being set free may make us unpopular; but we are sent back into our communities to live out and preach the "good things that the Lord has done for you."