



REPO MAN

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The St. Croix River in Minnesota is a 164 miles long tributary of the Mississippi. It's a beautiful river. Sometimes when we go back to visit Karin's parents, we'll go for a long boat ride on the St. Croix. From the place where we drop into the water, we have two choices. We can go left or right, up or down stream.

If you go to the left and go upstream, you leave civilization behind. Houses and cars on the banks give way to trees, and about 45 minutes into the journey, you have the river to yourself. Then, a little further on, you start to pass these remote sandbars. You can pick one that looks the most inviting and pull the boat up to shore. You never know quite what you'll find, but if you've got a spirit of adventure, you could end up discovering your own private oasis for a picnic. Karin's dad once left me and the boys there on a sandbar for a few hours when he had to take the boat back to town. We had a lot of fun, but I was also keenly aware that I was totally alone with two young kids and no cell phone and no way to leave.

Now if you turn right instead of left and go downstream, you find an entirely different scene. There you meet lots of boat traffic. You run into more public parks and groomed beaches. You get the safety of numbers and the comfort of a tried and true spot that many other people had already found and know to be a good place.

The same beautiful river – just two different approaches to having fun in the water. Personally, my favorite was the sandbar. I liked exploring the more remote areas and discovering a hidden gem of a beach.

I feel like I had a similar decision in front of me for this morning's sermon. Dropping into the St. Mark River, I could go left or right in chapter 5: I could choose a more comfortable section that I'm familiar with and I've preached on before, or I could go with a story that feels more remote and that's gotten less attention. There's value in both – it's all Scripture. But I like the idea of seeing what can be found in less heavily trafficked sections of the Bible and discovering the hidden gems.

So that's what we'll do – we'll take the road less traveled and pick up where we left last week. After Jesus calmed the storm, he and his disciples kept heading east across the Sea of Galilee.

Mark 5:1-20

They went across the lake to the region of the Gerasenes. When Jesus got out of the boat, a man with an evil spirit came from the tombs to meet him. This man lived in the tombs, and no one could bind him any more, not even with a chain. For he had often been chained hand and foot, but he tore the chains apart and broke the irons on his feet. No one was strong enough to subdue him. Night and day among the tombs and in the hills he would cry out and cut himself with stones.

When he saw Jesus from a distance, he ran and fell on his knees in front of him. He shouted at the top of his voice, "What do you want with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? Swear to God that you won't torture me!" For Jesus had said to him, "Come out of this man, you evil spirit!"

Then Jesus asked him, "What is your name?"

"My name is Legion," he replied, "for we are many." And he begged Jesus again and again not to send them out of the area.

A large herd of pigs was feeding on the nearby hillside. The demons begged Jesus, "Send us among the pigs; allow us to go into them." He gave them permission, and the evil spirits came out and went into the pigs. The herd, about two thousand in number, rushed down the steep bank into the lake and were drowned.

Those tending the pigs ran off and reported this in the town and countryside, and the people went out to see what had happened. When they came to Jesus, they saw the man who had been possessed by the legion of demons, sitting there, dressed and in his right mind; and they were afraid. Those who had seen it told the people what had happened to the demon-possessed man-and told about the pigs as well. Then the people began to plead with Jesus to leave their region.

As Jesus was getting into the boat, the man who had been demon-possessed begged to go with him. Jesus did not let him, but said, "Go home to your family and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and how he has had mercy on you." So the man went away and began to tell in the Decapolis how much Jesus had done for him. And all the people were amazed.

Exorcisms, naked men and suicidal pigs. It's a wild story. Fascinating, but you can see why you don't hear many three point sermons on this section. Kind of a prickly passage to get your hands around. It seems too bizarre to be relevant in the 21st century.

But Mark devotes an unusually large amount of ink to it. The story is roughly 3 times as long as the one we read last week about Jesus calming the storm. And this is Mark, who communicates things in a rapid, get-to-the-point style. He doesn't add anything for the sake of color. So for him to slow down and take his time with this story, there must be an important message we're supposed to take away from this.

We get a little freaked out when we read about demons. Some of us get scared to death at the very idea. The thought of evil spirits lurking around brings up too many horrifying images from movies we've seen and we don't want to go there.

For others of us, the demon stories in the Bible are kind of awkward embarrassments. They're the unscientific parts of Scripture that we can't quite believe. With modern knowledge of medicine and psychology, it just seems like there are too many rational explanations to accept what first century Christians considered demon possession.

In other words, we don't have a modern frame of reference for stories like this. Western society doesn't see this kind of thing very often. But just because we don't recognize it as easily doesn't mean we aren't engaged in spiritual struggles. The fight is no less real.

Christian theologians who are experts in this field have seen plenty of genuine demons to know they are still alive and well in the 21st century – even in America. And missionaries who work in other parts of the world where you still have traditional idol worship say that in those countries, demons are more openly active and visible in ways like we just read.

But the more spectacular stories of demonic activity can distract our attention from the more common ways the devil's henchmen like to attack us. We're more likely to struggle with demons in the lies we believe that lead to destructive thoughts and behavior. The Bible calls Satan the father of lies. Some battles with depression, suicidal thoughts, anxiety, doubts and addictions are really spiritual battles with real spiritual enemies aligned against us (for more on this, see Biola University's *Connections* magazine, Winter 2006).

So although they may operate differently in our experience, we can't ignore the reality of demons in our modern existence. They haven't gone away, and they can't all be explained away. But no matter what you think about them, don't get too hung up on the demons, because they are not the center of this story. Mark isn't writing to make us believe in evil spirits, he's writing to make us believe in Jesus. We can get lost on a rabbit trail trying to make sense of the devil's forces, when our focus should stay on what Christ is doing in the story. Because what's happening here has far greater reach than just for people who are possessed.

I think the real lesson of this story is the lesson of the repo man. Do you know who the repo man is? Hopefully not too well. He's the guy who comes to visit when you don't make your car payments. The bank may have sent you a few warning notices that they're about ready to take back your vehicle, but the repo man himself usually shows up without much warning. Things sometimes get ugly and violent, so he usually tries to come in the middle of the night or when you're at work so that he can take your car without having to talk to you personally.

They say that possession is nine tenths of the law, but the repo man represents the other tenth, which is rightful ownership. That's why what he is doing is called a "legal steal."

The car doesn't really belong to you if you haven't paid for it. The real owner has the right to come get it.

Jesus is doing a legal steal here. He's the repo man, reclaiming a person for God that the devil thinks is his. Only Jesus doesn't sneak in and do it quietly. There's a major confrontation, because the demons possessing the man don't want to give him up.

As bizarre as the details of the story appear, this is not a rare, fringe occurrence for Jesus. This is the heart and soul of what he came for. One of the books I was reading this week said, "Other miracles are a sign of God's kingdom being near. This is the actual thing itself." This is God's kingdom in action. This is Jesus using his authority in the most profound way – prying Satan's fingers off this man and saying, "This one is mine and you can't have him."

Christ takes that fight on for each one of us, telling the devil he has no right to control our lives. That's why this story matters. It's our story.

Let's get into the details and see just what happened. Before we do, though, I want to go back and reread something Jesus said that we talked about last week.

Mark 4:35

That day when evening came, he said to his disciples, "Let us go over to the other side."

We said last week that the journey across the lake had been Jesus' idea. It was his plan and his choice of destinations. At the beginning of our story today, Jesus and his disciples have arrived on the other side of the lake. As near as we can tell, this would have been close to a site archaeologists have found of a little village called Kursi. There is a hillside and nearby caves that were once tombs. There's also evidence that some people lived in the caves at one time.

This is in the region called the Decapolis – which is a collection of ten Roman cities in the area. It was a mostly non-Jewish area, as you can tell by the fact that they were raising pigs.

Jesus has this dramatic clash with Legion, and the pigs run in the lake. It's quite an arrival. But what happens when it's all over?

Then the people began to plead with Jesus to leave their region.

Jesus gets back in the boat and goes back where he came from.

Mark 5:21

When Jesus had again crossed over by boat to the other side of the lake, a large crowd gathered around him while he was by the lake.

So let's get this straight. Jesus takes his disciples on this treacherous journey through a deadly storm. It takes them hours to get across the lake. They go to a place outside the safety zone for respectable Jews, getting that close to pigs and Gentiles. When they get there, Jesus helps one crazy man, then gets back in the boat and returns to where he came from. He has risked life and limb to help a single individual who probably wasn't even Jewish.

If the disciples stopped to think about it at all, they might have been a little upset with Jesus for putting them through what he did. It seemed like a highly dangerous and inefficient way to operate. But this is the kind of Savior he is. It's one of 3 sides of a Savior we see in this story, and this is

Jesus the Personal

It's not out of his way to find this man – it's on his way. It isn't a waste of time for him – it's exactly how he chooses to spend his time. It is just as important for him to reach the lonely, isolated, unimpressive person as it was for him to teach the big crowds. Jesus made it clear that he didn't just die for the whole world – he died for individuals.

Matt 18:12-14

What do you think? If a man owns a hundred sheep, and one of them wanders away, will he not leave the ninety-nine on the hills and go to look for the one that wandered off? And if he finds it, I tell you the truth, he is happier about that one sheep than about the ninety-nine that did not wander off.

In October of last year, 60 minutes aired a story about the difference today's medical technology is making in the survival rate of soldiers injured in Iraq. They followed the story of one Marine who was hit by a roadside bomb. He lost a lung, half his body was burned and his kidneys were failing. But the Army flew in a specialist team from Germany with some of the military's top doctors – just for him.

Because of his condition, they were airlifting him to Germany. 60 minutes said some of the life support gear the medical staff was using is so advanced, it isn't even available in the U.S. yet. And at the same time the soldier was being flown to Germany, special medical teams from Texas and Maryland were flying in to Germany to meet him.

That's all for one person. You start multiplying the intensity of that effort by the hundreds and the expense of being there for every soldier seems astronomical. The reporter asked one of the doctors, "At what point do you say to yourself, 'We can't save this life'?"

The doctor responded, "You know, we don't make that decision. We go full court press on everybody."

Doctor Poffenbarger, a neurosurgeon who does incredibly intricate work in Iraq, said, "I had decided when I went to Iraq that we were going to go straight to the wall for every wounded soldier. We weren't going to give up on any of them."

To have the full resources of the U.S. military come to the rescue of an individual soldier is staggering. It seems all out of proportion. But as I thought about it, I could see how much those doctors are reflecting the attitude of Christ. He goes to the wall for every single one of us, bringing all the resources of the God of the universe to our rescue. God doesn't want to see a single one of us not make it. So he goes full court press on everybody.

He cares about each of us on a personal, name by name basis. He sees your plight, your problems. He goes to great lengths to pursue you.

We tend to envision God as being a bigger version of ourselves. I'm a terrible multitasker. I don't remember birthdays. I forget what's on my calendar for the day, and I could never tell you on a Monday what I did over the weekend. So for me, the idea that the God of the universe sees and cares about the details of my small life seems impossible. But thankfully, God isn't a big me – he's God. He has the capacity to run the world and still be connected to each of us in a genuinely personal way. It's humbling and breathtaking and it changes everything.

It changes everything because I can no longer respond to God in generic terms. He's not a God off in space somewhere. He's a God who just stepped out of a boat on my beach and is walking toward me. I have to process his claim on my life personally. What am I going to do with the fact that he loves me, Jeff Peabody, personally? What am I going to do with the sacrifice he made for me? And I don't just get to deal with that once when I decide whether or not follow him. It's an everyday process. We talk about having a personal relationship with Jesus, but sometimes I don't think we realize just how constant and invasive that can be. We're okay with God hating sin in the world, and we generally agree with him. But does he have to hate my particular sins? A personal Jesus means a personal response.

In the song *All This Time*, Sting wrote, "Men go crazy in congregations. They only get better one by one." Jesus approaches each of us one by one. He pours himself into every single relationship. Are we ready to encounter a personal Jesus?

The man in our story wasn't at first. He was a mess.

This man lived in the tombs, and no one could bind him any more, not even with a chain. For he had often been chained hand and foot, but he tore the chains apart and broke the irons on his feet. No one was strong enough to subdue him. Night and day among the tombs and in the hills he would cry out and cut himself with stones.

It's a very telling picture Mark paints for us. We can observe several things about the effects these demons were having on the man. First,

1. This was beyond a self control issue.

The forces at work on this man were far beyond anything he could control with his own will power. Apparently other people had also tried to control him, as evidenced by the chains and shackles. The demons had this superhuman strength to break through any kind of human restraint.

2. The spiral was downward.

The man is a wreck. He's devolved into a completely self-destructive person. He's crying out in pain from the wounds he is inflicting on himself. Mark says he's cutting himself with rocks. The demons are bent on ripping this man to shreds.

3. The result is dehumanizing.

Look at the man's condition: He's been driven from his community. He's quit wearing clothes. The people chained him up like some animal. He has been reduced to something sub-human. He's lost his identity as these demons have taken over his life.

These are the same signs we can see in our own lives as sin gets a hold of us. It doesn't take long when you're wrestling with some sin to see how powerless self control can be sometimes. We get in a downward spiral that starts to become self-destructive. And slowly, sin chips away at our humanity. We become just a shell.

Sometimes the grip sin has on us isn't as obvious to the outside world as it was for this man. We can present a pretty good image and not let anyone see what's eating us up inside. When Deion Sanders was at the height of his athletic career, he says his ambition and greed was consuming him and leaving him hollow. He says

I would buy myself another car, more suits, more expensive clothes, more jewelry, more of everything, and I already knew before I got out of the mall that it wasn't going to make me happy. I tried throwing myself into my career, into sports, trying to see how far I could go, and when I achieved every goal I could think of, I was right back where I started. Empty, empty, empty and nothing I did could touch that deep loneliness inside of me. I couldn't stop. It was just crushing pain.

It eventually led him to a suicide attempt. Deion Sanders credits Christ as being the only one who was able to lift him out of his despair. That's exactly what the man in our story discovered. He not only met Jesus the Personal, he met

Jesus the Powerful

The demons were so strong that no human effort had been able to contain them. But Jesus did. The demons immediately recognized that Jesus was more powerful than them. They tried to bargain with him for their own survival. Jesus wasn't going to be manipulated. He forced the demons to give him their name – Legion. The commentators all say how important that step was. To know the name of the demons was to have control over them. They had to reveal themselves and acknowledge who they were.

There is great power in bringing hidden sins into the light and naming them for what they are. I know guys who have struggled with a secret pornography habit and when they've found the courage to name it out loud to someone else, they begin to find freedom from it again. Evil holds on to power by lurking in the dark, and that's why Jesus calls demons out into the open where he can deal with them.

As that happened, Jesus took away the demons' hold on that man. He banished them to the pigs, which ended up being a very short-lived stay for them.

People sometimes wonder why Jesus let the demons go into that herd of pigs and let them drown in the lake. I think part of the reason was for the man he healed to see physical proof that the demons had left his body. He also needed to know where those demons would have ended up taking him if he hadn't been set free. That was the direction everything was going. They were intent on ultimately destroying him, because that is in their nature.

That was a powerful transfer to see. But where Jesus truly showed his power was in what he did after the demons were gone.

People from all around the area came to see what was going on.

When they came to Jesus, they saw the man who had been possessed by the legion of demons, sitting there, dressed and in his right mind.

Jesus not only got rid of the demons – he undid their work in the man's life. He gave him back his mind. He dressed him in a new suit of clothes, providing him a new identity. In short, he gave him back his humanity.

That's the power of Christ at work – not only to end the grip sin has on us, but to reverse the damage that has been done to us, damage we've done to ourselves. Listen, if you're here this morning with scars from past experiences and the demons that have done a number on you – you need Jesus the Powerful. He is in the business of restoring our humanity to us. He can do more than free you – he can heal up your wounds. He'll give you a new set of clothes.

Galatians 3:27

For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.

We can have a new identity in him. Whether we are needing his strength to stop doing what we're doing, or we're needing his ability to repair our damaged souls, he will come and recreate us. He's that powerful.

What an experience that man had – to go from being crazy out of control to completely sane and normal in a single moment. No wonder he was so grateful and devoted to Jesus afterwards:

As Jesus was getting into the boat, the man who had been demon-possessed begged to go with him.

He begged him. That word can have a bit of leaning in it, like the man was pressing Jesus pretty hard to convince him taking him along would be the right thing to do.

Jesus did not let him, but said, "Go home to your family and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and how he has had mercy on you." So the man went away and began to tell in the Decapolis how much Jesus had done for him. And all the people were amazed.

To me, this shows what I would like to call

Jesus the Practical

Put yourself in the sandals of this man. An incredible miracle has happened in your life. Looking around, you now realize just how awful you had been. Everyone in town knew about the crazy man with no clothes. You think about how you had embarrassed your family and friends. This stranger comes along who accepts you totally and unconditionally. He makes you feel so much better about yourself. Wouldn't it be great to just leave this old life behind? To go someplace where nobody would look at you funny, where nobody knew your shameful history. You would gladly become Jesus' poster boy for success.

But Jesus has just been asked to leave the area. As far as we know from Scripture, he never went back there. And he sees the effective witness this man needs to have right where he is. So Jesus says, "Stay. Do the hard work of living out your faith in front of friends and family."

The man does that. And his testimony has a widespread impact on the ten cities of the Decapolis. In essence, he becomes the first Gentile missionary to the Gentile world.

We don't always get to pick our assignments. Nothing sounds better than just getting to hang out with Jesus. I want those life changing moments when we can see what God is doing really clearly. But life is more than moments. And Jesus is far too practical to allow us to separate from reality. He wants to forge our faith in the fires of everyday life.

To quote our dear friend Oswald Chambers, "We look for visions from Heaven, for earthquakes and thunders of God's power...and we never dream that all the time God is in the common place things and people around us. If we will do the duty that lies nearest, we shall see him."

So quite often he tells us, "Bloom where you're planted. Live a consistent life in front of the people you know and love. Talk about my mercy with your family and friends."

There's nothing more challenging than to be genuine in your faith in front of those who know you best and who know your entire history. You might be able to fool complete strangers, but not the people in your closest circle. And it's in those relationships that Christ wants us to take him.

It's not very glamorous. We'd like to think he had a bigger assignment for us and that following him would mean something less mundane. But if we're willing to go where he sends us, we will reach people in ways that we never dreamed. If we can overcome our desire to be part of something impressive, we can find ourselves being part of something important.

All in all, this wild story of strange happenings long ago still has a great deal to say to us here and now. As you think of the Jesus we've seen this morning, what about him hits home to you?

Am I living like my relationship with Christ is personal? Do I believe he cares about the details of my life enough to go to the wall for me individually? How am I doing at responding to him in a personal way?

Where do I most need his power right now? Am I needing to break free from my demons, or do I need him to heal me up from some damage that's been done? He's in the business of restoring our humanity. Where do I most need that?

Finally, what is the hard task right in front of me? God is in the commonplace, everyday aspects of life. What is he calling me to dig in and do for him right where I'm at? What am I resisting?

God doesn't want Satan to have any claim on your life, and he sent Jesus to take you back. Praise God for the repo man.