



## RECLAIMED

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It's good to be back here with you this morning. I've heard great things about last Sunday, and I'm so grateful to Ken for filling in. God has blessed our church with some outstanding teachers, and as much as I love preaching, I also love sharing this spot with them, because I think it's healthier for our church to have more than one voice.

We were in Winthrop, in Eastern Washington, having a little time in the snow. If you're wanting more details, I'm not really the one to ask. I'm so bad at summarizing vacations. When someone asks me, "How was your trip?" A typical answer from me would be, "It was good. Had a good time. Kind of a long drive. But we had fun. We're glad to be home." No nonsense. Clean and crisp. Keep it to the essentials. Because that's generally all I remember.

But if you ask Karin the same question, you'll get a totally different response. She can give you an hour by hour replay. She'll tell you about the awesome sledding hill we found, and the deer who came right up to the door, and the incredible dinner we had, and the beautiful mountains with fresh snow on the last day. She'll tell you how relaxing it was and the conversations we had and spiritual insights she gained as she journaled. A little bit of a difference, huh? Whatever. All I've got to say to that is...she's not here today, okay? So you're just going to have to settle for "It was a good trip."

Matthew makes me feel a little better about myself, though, because he's giving us a trip report this morning, and I've got to say – he's a little skimpy on the details. Short and to the point.

This is kind of uncharacteristic for him. Mark is normally the writer who takes the bare bones approach to his stories. But in this particular case, Mark actually provides a significant amount of color that Matthew chose to leave out.

So, even though our study is focused on Matthew and the changed lives he tells us about, we're going to lean heavily on Mark's version of events for this story to fill in some of the gaps.

We'll pick right up where we left off in Matthew 8. If you were here two weeks ago, you may recall that Jesus and his disciples were travelling across the Sea of Galilee and

they ran into that terrible storm. This morning they have finally arrived at their destination.

### **Matthew 8:28-34**

*When he arrived at the other side in the region of the Gadarenes, two demon-possessed men coming from the tombs met him. They were so violent that no one could pass that way.*

*"What do you want with us, Son of God?" they shouted. "Have you come here to torture us before the appointed time?"*

*Some distance from them a large herd of pigs was feeding. The demons begged Jesus, "If you drive us out, send us into the herd of pigs."*

*He said to them, "Go!" So they came out and went into the pigs, and the whole herd rushed down the steep bank into the lake and died in the water. Those tending the pigs ran off, went into the town and reported all this, including what had happened to the demon-possessed men. Then the whole town went out to meet Jesus. And when they saw him, they pleaded with him to leave their region.*

We have been observing Jesus dealing with all kinds of problems that face everybody. Diseases. Sins. Fears. Natural disasters. Now we see him addressing another arena of life – the spiritual realm. And things start to sound a little strange. Crazy men hanging out in a graveyard. Demons yelling. Pigs drowning.

We were in more familiar territory with the other stories. Because we've all been sick. We've all needed forgiveness and courage. But not too many of us relate immediately to talk about demonic forces. In our culture, the only place demons are talked about is in horror movies or fantasy books.

Part of the reason for the disconnect is because we have some misconceptions about demons and what they do.

### **Misconception #1: They were back then and over there, not here and now.**

Tales of evil spirits are something from a different time and place. We are okay reading about it in the Bible, because we just lump it in with a different culture and era. That lets us distance ourselves from it.

But the Bible says otherwise.

### **1 Peter 5:8-9**

*Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. Resist him, standing firm in the faith, because you know that your brothers throughout the world are undergoing the same kind of sufferings.*

Christians everywhere and in every time face spiritual attack. If we're following Christ, you and I can be sure that Satan is going to do everything he can to trip us up and resist our progress. We don't talk about it all that often. We're not comfortable thinking about it. And we don't always recognize it. But that doesn't make it any less real. God is not just our healer and comforter – he's our warrior, waging a battle on a front we don't even see. One of the reasons we don't always see that truth is because of another myth we believe.

**Misconception #2: They only operate in fringe and freakish ways.**

When we think of demonic activity, we envision objects flying around the room or people speaking in scary voices. Even our story today leans toward the spectacular.

And there are cases where that's how the devil chooses to manifest himself. But if we're talking about battles against spiritual forces, we can think instead about the battles that take place in our own spirit. Because that's where most of them happen. We'll describe some of those battles in a few minutes, but they are internal struggles that don't show up with any flashy special effects. And they are common to all of us – not just a few freaky situations that give us goosebumps..

**Misconception #3: I'm a Christian, so I have immunity.**

You know those reality shows where contestants can win immunity so they don't have to worry about being voted off? We can think that's what it means to have Jesus in our hearts. "Well, he's stronger than any evil force, so I'm protected."

It's true that Christ is greater than the devil, but that doesn't change our need to be on guard. If we were immune, why would Paul tell us to put on the armor of God? If we can't be affected, why does the Bible warn that some Christians will leave their faith to follow demons?

So then, this account of Jesus taking on the demons by the Sea of Galilee is more than just ancient history – this is a case study for our own experience. The same clash between God and Satan, between light and dark is going on in our lives. We have way more in common with this story than we might think initially.

But it's hard to really wrap our heads around that one. When we're physically sick and need healing, we know it because of how we feel. But when something is going on that's affecting us spiritually, we might chalk it up to any number of things. I always like the scene in A Christmas Carol when Scrooge meets the ghost of his old partner Jacob Marley. Marley's trying to convince him he's real, and Scrooge says, "How do I know you're not just an underdone potato or bad beef?" We're quick to call our problems anything but spiritual.

And sometimes they are. We don't want to reach the point where we're blaming demons for our own bad attitudes or the general difficulties that come with living on this planet.

We don't need to give the devil any more credit than he deserves. But we can't ignore the reality of demonic activity, either.

And that begs the question: How do we know? When am I just in a bad mood and when am I under some kind of attack? Let's look again at how Matthew described the scene.

*When he arrived at the other side in the region of the Gadarenes, two demon-possessed men coming from the tombs met him. They were so violent that no one could pass that way.*

Tony Blosl and Danny Childress. When I was in 7<sup>th</sup> grade, there was a period of time when Tony and Danny would bully me almost every day. I could not walk down the hallway at Chinook Middle School without them finding me and harassing me. I dreaded walking past their lockers every day. That was their territory and they waited for me to cross it.

That was nothing compared to these two men. They had taken over the entire vicinity. You couldn't walk past them without being attacked. They had turned the entire territory into a dangerous wasteland.

One thing that's true about spiritual warfare in general is that

### **Spiritual attacks make for unsafe places.**

These unsafe places I'm talking about aren't geographical – they're places in your heart and mind that have become too painful for you to go. So you avoid them every chance you get.

Maybe it's something in your past. You've never been able to heal up and move beyond it, and it's just this thing that sits there. You're too ashamed to talk to anyone about and you're afraid of digging into it yourself. That can be a sign that there is a spiritual dimension to it that is making it so unsafe. Satan doesn't want you to get over it, because he knows that if you do, it might become something you use to minister to other people.

Sometimes the unsafe place is not in your past but in your present, because of some sin. Here's what happens: We know something we're doing is wrong. We can't justify it. So we just wall it off from the rest of our life. We compartmentalize it and don't deal with it. We bury it, deny it and develop all kinds of layers of dishonesty to avoid dealing with it.

There can be unsafe zones in relationships. Maybe you and your spouse can't talk about certain things without a huge fight every time. There is nothing the devil likes better than to create conflict in a marriage, because that is one picture of Christ and the church in the world, and if he can destroy or deface that, he can go a long way toward messing up someone's faith. Every time those fights erupt, Satan sees an opportunity. That's why the Bible says,

### **Ephesians 4:26-27**

*Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold.*

When there are topics that are off the table for discussion because they get too heated, when there are corners of hiddenness that we keep from one another, those are sure signs that something spiritual is going on.

That happens in churches as much as marriages. I have known people who had a conflict with each other YEARS maybe even DECADES in the past, sitting in the same church services week after week, simply avoiding contact with each other and ignoring the elephant in the living room. That is giving the devil a foothold. That's giving up territory to him and letting fear win the day. And it is a poison that will eat away at the life of a church. Avoidance of real issues is an important indicator of spiritual unhealth. Recognizing where those unsafe areas are in our lives is the first step toward regaining access to them and giving them over to God.

Matthew also tells us that these men were living in the tombs. What a sad existence and a tragic metaphor of how sin can lead us away from life. Have you seen the Verizon wireless commercial where a family checks into a motel and the guy at the front counter warns them that it's a dead zone? Calls don't get in or out.

These spiritual attacks lead us to a dead zone, where they isolate us.

### **Spiritual attacks isolate us.**

While we were in Winthrop, this weekend, we watched the movie Madagascar 2, where these zoo animals return to the jungle in Africa and meet wild animals. The giraffe from the zoo, Melman, is a hypochondriac, so he asks the wild giraffes if they have a doctor. They tell him no. And he says, "What do you do if you get sick?" And they said, "We pick out a dying hole and we die."

So when one of the other giraffe's notices a brown spot on Melman that he thinks is a disease, Melman goes off by himself, digs a hole and buries himself up to the neck and waits to die. Fortunately, his friends come along and rescue him, and he discovers that it was just a normal giraffe spot anyway.

When we come under spiritual attack, one of the most common symptoms is this desire to isolate ourselves from everyone. This confusing fog of oppression settles over us for no reason. We want to slink off and find a good dying hole somewhere, when what we need is to surround ourselves with other members of the body of Christ.

The problem is that when we're in that spot ourselves, we don't see it, or if we do, we don't want to change it. When you're there, that's how you want it. When Melman was down in that dying hole, he wasn't about to climb out on his own. He needed a friend. This is one of those signs that we need to be aware of for each other. When you notice

that somebody hasn't been at church for a while, when your friend hasn't called or keeps cancelling on getting together, take it upon yourself to reach out.

Half the time it may be nothing. Maybe they've just been busy. But there may be more to the story. They could be feeling attacked by the enemy, and you may never know how influential you are in bringing them back to community.

Karin's friend Debbie went to high school with a guy named John Peter. He was a total partier in a big way. He went on to UCLA where he had the same reputation as a heavy drinker and all around wild guy.

Years later, Debbie ran into him in Chicago and was shocked to learn that he was now on staff with Intervarsity, a Christian organization working on campuses with college students. She asked him, "How did you find Jesus?" He said, "When I was at UCLA, my friends and I would go out and get wasted. We'd come back to the dorm, and there were these two Christians there who cleaned up our vomit every time." He couldn't wrap his mind around what would make people do that, and it was that most humble act of service that brought him to Christ.

There's an old hymn that says, "We die alone, for on its own, each ember loses fire." The devil loves to make us withdraw from community, because it is a sure way to discourage us and beat us down.

As I said at the beginning, Mark gives us some more details about what was going on. He zeroes in on one of the men in particular and describes his condition.

### **Mark 5:3-5**

*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.*

What a pathetic, painful existence. Not only was this man isolated and violent toward others – he was harming his own body.

### **Spiritual attacks lead to self-destruction.**

Psychologists can give you any number of behaviors that they would classify as self-destructive. Addictions to drugs or alcohol or sex. Eating disorders. Compulsive drivenness. Undermining your own success. Even trash-talking about yourself all the time. And they say that these patterns all come from deep feelings of shame and powerlessness. I don't like myself and I can't do anything about it.

Take a look at what God says about who we are in him:

1. We are God's children. (Romans 8:16)

2. We are God's temple. (1 Corinthians 3:16)
3. We are Christ's friends. (John 15:15)
4. We are new people (2 Corinthians 5:17)
5. We have a purpose (Ephesians 2:10)

No wonder the devil and his forces want to attack us in how we think about ourselves and how we treat ourselves. If we matter that much to God, if we're something God is building up, then tearing us down is a number one priority for God's enemies.

This ties directly into one last point I'd like to make about the nature of how demons work on us, and that is that

### **Spiritual attacks find their strength in deception.**

When Jesus was talking about Satan, he said this:

#### **John 8:44**

*When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies.*

You can see this in the way the demons talked to Jesus. "Have you come to torture us? You've got no business being here before the appointed time."

First of all, Jesus never tortures anybody, and second of all, he makes his own appointed time. His arrival on the scene made it the appointed time. The demons had no rights to claim Jesus couldn't be there. They were the ones who didn't belong. But they twisted the message all around to put Jesus on the defensive.

Our limited knowledge of evil spirits has us thinking that to get rid of them takes a big showdown or exorcism that takes special skills or incredible faith. But that's just another one of the lies. Neil Anderson says this:

*Freedom from spiritual problems and bondage is not a power encounter; it's a truth encounter. Satan is a liar, and he will work undercover at all costs. But the truth of God's word exposes him and his lies...and when his lie is exposed by the truth, his plans are foiled.*

He goes on to share a story from when he was a boy growing up on a farm. He and his father and his brother would go visit the farm next door. Their neighbors had this yappy little dog who would come out to greet them. Neil's dad and brother wouldn't budge, but Neil was scared to death of that little dog and would take off running. Guess who the dog decided to chase? Neil hopped up into their pickup truck to get away.

Now the dog didn't throw him up there. Everybody else could see that the dog only had power over Neil if Neil gave it to him. He was using Neil's fear to make him believe he could hurt him. When Neil finally climbed down and kicked a rock his direction, the dog scampered away.

Satan is like that dog who wants us to trick us into believing he's more powerful than God. But that's a lie. And when we stand our ground with the truth, he runs away.

**James 4:7**

*Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you*

What lies do you find yourself believing? That God couldn't love someone like you? That you have no future? That your past defines you? That there's no hope of changing? That this is all there is? That God has abandoned you? That your choices aren't hurting anyone? That nobody understands you? Take your pick. They're all part of the deception woven by the father of lies.

As Jesus arrives on the scene and we watch what he does, our attention immediately goes to the pigs. Thanks to Mark, again, we know that it was a large herd of pigs – about 2000 in number. Imagine the frightening sight and sound of that many pigs stampeding over the cliff into the sea. Thundering and squealing and cracking. It's a horrific and unforgettable image.

But what's even more frightening is to realize that that kind of force had been bound up in these two men. The pigs are just a sideshow. They just help us glimpse the enormously destructive power Jesus freed these men from.

**Mark 5:14-17**

*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.*

Dressed and in his right mind. This man embodies what Jesus does for us when he breaks the power of evil in our lives. He dresses us, which ever since the Garden of Eden has been God's way of taking away our shame and sadness. I love how the Psalm writer puts it:

**Psalm 30:11-12**

*You turned my wailing into dancing;  
you removed my sackcloth and clothed me with joy,  
that my heart may sing to you and not be silent.*

Christ changes the way we're seen from the outside, but he also changes us inside. This man's mind was restored. His thinking was cleared up. The voices were out of his head so he could hear God again.

Jesus is the only one who can lift the confusion from our hearts. He's the only one who can quiet the chaos in our minds.

Ironically, the crowd that has gathered is not so pleased. The townspeople people were so intimidated by this guy when he was running around naked and hurting people, and now that he is just sitting, with all his clothes on and his normal mind back, they're even more afraid. And they ask Jesus to leave.

Sometimes we prefer the pigs. We'd rather live with our problems than have to change. We're not always ready for Christ to do his work. And he never forces his way in. He graciously steps back into the boat and leaves.

But before he does, he has one last conversation with this man.

### **Mark 5:18-20**

*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.*

In some ways, I think this conversation is almost as life-changing as Jesus getting rid of the demons. Because now that he's removed one thing, he replaces it with something else. He gives this man a new role and purpose in life. Jesus doesn't treat him like damaged goods that he needs to gingerly carry along. He sends him out on a mission. And it's an important one. The Decapolis was 10 cities that were made up of mostly Gentiles, and we have no record of Jesus ever returning to that area. This man would become the first missionary to the non-Jewish world.

Imagine being him, wanting badly to just hang out with Jesus and enjoy his newfound freedom. But Jesus knew that his faith needed to be lived out among the people who had known him previously. The validity of Christ's work would be put to the test, because this was a town that was very familiar with his whole history. Jesus had full confidence that those demons wouldn't be back and this man wouldn't return to his previous state.

It would be easier if believing in Jesus was just about us and him, if we could hide away and spend our time getting to know him better by being alone with him. But he sends us back into our everyday world, among the people who know us best and says, "Live for me here. Show through your life what I've done for you. Be the change you say you've experienced." This is the responsibility of those he has reclaimed as his own.

I want to leave you with a story this morning .Back in 1997, Suzette Kelo was a recently divorced nurse in her 40s. As she tried to pull her life back together, she saved and saved her money until she was able to buy a little house in New London, Connecticut, overlooking the sea. It wasn't much of a house, but she loved it and immediately painted it pink.

Just a few months later, Pfizer, the giant pharmaceutical company announced plans to build a new facility nearby, and they wanted to buy her house. They wanted to buy the whole neighborhood. Suzette and her neighbors refused. Shortly after, they each got a note tacked on their door. The city was invoking their right of eminent domain, which says that the government has the right to take property if they need it for the greater good. That normally means for roads or schools, but Pfizer had enough financial and political clout to get the city and state to do what it wanted and seize property for them.

The situation looked hopeless, and one by one Suzette's neighbors caved in and sold their property. But Suzette refused. It was her house and she did not want to let it go. The neighborhood was being bulldozed around her, but she continued to fight. She took her case to court. She lost. She appealed. For eight years she battled to keep her home.

Finally, the case ended up in front of the Supreme Court. They heard the case and came back with a 5-4 verdict in favor of...the State of Connecticut. They said Suzette Kelo would have to leave.

Big corporate dollars were against her. The city and state governments were against her. The highest court in the land voted against her. Those are impossible odds. But Suzette still refused to give up her house.

By this time, all the national media has picked up the story and Connecticut is starting to look really bad for the way they are badgering this woman. A new governor inherited the whole mess and just wanted it all to go away.

Then Suzette came up with a solution. She would agree to leave her property if they would save the house. She wanted it moved to a new location AND added to the historic registry so it would never again be threatened to be torn down. And that's exactly what happened. The little pink house was moved board by board to another part of town, and today it has been turned into a museum and monument to the incredible fight Suzette waged to keep her home from being destroyed. It became an even greater win than she had originally hoped for, because not only did the house survive – it became something much bigger. It became the symbol for homeowners everywhere. All of Suzette's hard work and demands to be heard started a tidal wave of legal reform across the country that will help make sure similar situations never happen again. She not only kept the system from destroying her house – she saved countless other houses in the process.

I love that story because it shows such determination. I love it because it has Jesus written all over it. We are like living houses where the devil has taken up residence. Maybe a whole house here, or just a room there. But his evil forces have staked a claim on us and he's got a lot of resources at his disposal.. The odds look overwhelmingly against us. Some of us have been kept down by him for a very long time.

But Jesus says, “This house is mine, and you can’t have it. I won’t let you.” He said in John that no one can snatch us out of his hand. And he fights, and he fights, and he fights, and he fights. And he wins. He reclaims us.

Think about it. Jesus and his disciples spent hours crossing a lake, risking life and limb. They get out of the boat to help two men. That’s it. Only two. Then what happens? They get back in the boat and return to the other side. All that risk and effort for one miracle. And that’s how he goes after each one of us.

When the Israelites escaped Egypt and were being chased by Pharaoh’s army, everything looked hopeless. But Moses told the people this:

**Exodus 14:14**

*The LORD will fight for you; you need only to be still.*

The Lord is fighting for me. As we face our own impossible spiritual battles, the answer is not to fight harder or dig deeper. The answer is to be still and know that Jesus is fighting for us with everything he’s got. And he’s already secured the victory.

I want to give us some time to just be still this morning, so I’m going to guide us through a prayer as we close. Hang with me here. I know it can be easy to let your mind go everywhere else, but I’m going to ask that you give this your best focus.

Because we need to know where spiritual forces are at work in our own life. We need to know so we can invite God in and be aware of what he is doing. So take a moment to bow your head and just quiet your mind before God.

As you think about what we’ve discussed this morning, where are the unsafe places in your own life? Are there areas you’ve blocked off, parts of your experience or relationships you’re afraid to deal with? Talk to God about that right now.

Maybe there’s a lie you’ve been listening to, about yourself or about God. What is shaping how you think about yourself and your faith? Ask God to reveal any area where you might be deceived. What’s the truth encounter you’re needing today?

Now ask God to bring to mind somebody you know who may be isolated, locked in a spiritual battle all alone. Ask him to show you how you can come alongside them.