

OUT-OF-THE ORDINARY

Luke 8: 26-39

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When the gentiles encounter Jesus, great fear seizes them. That's not the usual response people have when they encounter Jesus—being seized by great fear.

Throughout the gospels, people respond to Jesus with amazement and astonishment. Or gratitude and love. Or puzzlement and misunderstanding. Or anger, even violence at times.

But the gentiles fear Jesus. And fearing Jesus, they ask him to leave.

Throughout the gospels, people flock from all over the Jewish countryside to crowd around Jesus—to see him, hear him, touch him—but these gentiles don't want Jesus anywhere near them. They ask him to leave.

Which Jesus does, he leaves.

Something out-of-the ordinary is happening in this story, even within the world the gospels create, where out-of-the ordinary is standard fare.

Let's back up a bit in Luke's story, and take another run through it.

At some point in his adult life, Jesus goes out to the River Jordan where his cousin, John, a Jewish prophet, is baptizing people, and telling them to give away everything they don't need. John baptizes Jesus, who's already given away everything he doesn't need, and immediately afterward, holy power descends upon Jesus.

Immediately upon receiving holy power, Jesus treks deeper into the wilderness, where he faces himself alone, with no distraction, for a long time. During that time, an extremely seductive temptation plagues him night and day—to use the holy power for personal gain, for ways that benefit him, Jesus. Jesus refuses. Only after overcoming this temptation does Jesus return from the wilderness to Galilee, with the holy power now at his disposal.

And this holy power is immense.

When Jesus speaks in public, the power of his words startle people. He amazes them, astonishes them, their jaws drop. The authority, the knowledge, the ability to turn a phrase to reveal God, to teach the holy way of living—Jesus blows people's minds.

Jesus uses the holy power to heal and restore the lives of multitudes of people who're sick with incurable diseases. He gives sight to the blind. He liberates people from the demons that are occupying people's bodies and minds.

Wherever Jesus goes, crowds congregate. People press in to get close, to touch him. Everywhere he goes, Jesus blows people's minds and heals their bodies. All around the Jewish countryside, the Jewish people are asking: is Jesus our messiah, our savior-king, our David who'll liberate us from those who occupy us?

Riding that wave of popularity in the Jewish territory, Jesus decides to venture further out into territory where gentiles are the majority.

He climbs into a boat with his disciples and sets off to cross a lake that's so big and so wild people call it a sea. Leaving the Jewish side of the sea, Jesus crosses to the other side, the gentile side. While crossing the lake, a fierce storm erupts and overwhelms them. Finding themselves at the mercy of wild forces beyond their control, the disciples fear for their lives. But Jesus has the power to calm and soothe these wild forces. The wind and the waves settle down, his disciples stop freaking out, and all arrive safely on the gentile shore.

Who's the very first gentile Jesus encounters?

A naked man, who lives outside like a wild animal, and who sleeps where people bury dead bodies. The man is dirty, he smells bad. His hair is wild, and so are his eyes.

He's on his knees, pounding his fists into hard sand, yelling at Jesus as loud as he can.

Demons—a legion of them—have invaded and occupied this man's body. They've taken possession of his mind. They've robbed him of his humanity. His life.

This legion of demons is powerful, too powerful for the people living in this area to control. Every now and then, with great effort, people manage to capture the man and bind him in shackles and chains. But he always breaks free, gets out-of-control once again, and goes totally wild, doing much harm to himself and others.

Jesus uses the holy power at his disposal to liberate the man from the legion of demons occupying him.

The demons flee in full retreat from the man to a large herd of pigs who're snorting happily on the hillside. Suddenly, the pigs careen madly down a steep embankment. They leap into the water, thrash around madly, and drown with ear-splitting squeals.

It's a horrible scene.

Naturally, the guys watching over the pigs freak out. As fast as they can, they sprint back to their villages to alert everyone. A guy got off a boat, they say. The demon-infested man fell to his knees and started screaming at the guy. Then he stopped screaming. Then everything was quiet for a second. Then the pigs went berserk, raced each other down the hill, jumped into the water, and drowned.

Shocked, the villagers rush to the lakeside.

There they see the man sitting calmly on the shore, fully clothed, in his right mind, talking normally.

They see an empty hillside, where pigs are supposed to be snorting happily. And the lake, upon which pigs are bobbing silently on the waves.

And they see Jesus, the guy who just did all of this.

And seeing Jesus, they're seized by fear. Jesus scares them.

It's not surprising, really.

Jesus has more power at his disposal than they've ever seen in their life.

They'd been living with this legion of demons for some time now, and over it they had no control. They could never liberate the man. They could never make the legion leave.

But now, after last night's gigantic storm out on the lake, this guy shows up in a boat in the morning, as if the storm delivered him. And he's so powerful, he can drive a legion of demons out of town like it's just a minor nuisance.

Who exactly is this guy? And what are his intentions? With all that power at his disposal, how will he treat us?

Keep in mind, these folks inhabit a world where people who wield more power, more often than not, use their power to control, oppress, and exploit people who wield less power. These folks inhabit a world in which people who have little power have legitimate fears when someone with immense power suddenly shows up, out of a storm, on their side of the lake.

These gentiles don't know Jesus. He's not one of them. He's an outsider. An immensely powerful outsider. So they have legitimate fears. The first being, has he come here to conquer us? Now that he's gotten rid of the demons, will his legions occupy us, control us, possess us, oppress us, and exploit us? These are legitimate fears.

More often than not, the answer would be yes, he's come to take over, because he can, because he's got the power to do it. Ordinarily, that's how things work in the world these people inhabit.

So the gentiles ask Jesus to leave.

They can't demand that Jesus leave. What if he says no? What if he gets angry?

All they can do is ask nicely, with trembling voices: please sir, will you leave us be?

And Jesus does.

He honors their request.

He's not there for personal gain. He's not there to conquer and occupy. He's not there to control and possess, to oppress and exploit. He's not there for the ordinary reasons that someone with so much power would show up on someone's shore.

But the gentiles don't know that. How could they? They're not Jewish.

Unlike their Jewish counterparts across the lake, these gentiles aren't looking at Jesus through Jewish eyes, through Jewish hearts and minds—through generations of Jewish suffering, and generations of Jewish expectation. Unlike their Jewish counterparts, these gentiles aren't expecting the messiah, the savior-king, the son of David, to liberate them, to love them, to lead them with justice and righteousness.

The gentiles just see a guy with immense power who's just stepped of a boat on their shore, and they legitimately fear what he might do with that power, because they know what people ordinarily do with that power.

But not Jesus. Jesus leaves. He means them no harm. His intent is completely benevolent.

It's not until later in the story, after Jesus' death and resurrection, in Acts of the Apostles, that gentiles in gentile territory begin to more fully understand and appreciate the sheer benevolence of Jesus Christ's power. And then, when that time comes, instead of asking Christ to leave, gentiles pray for Christ to remain. Pray that Christ will liberate, heal, and restore their lives, and through their faith in him, the lives of others.

But we're getting ahead of ourselves.

In today's story, in this first encounter between the Jewish messiah and gentiles in gentile territory, Jesus simply plants a seed, then leaves. A seed that scares people, because they don't know Jesus. But a seed that eventually blossoms and spreads, as the gentile church blossoms and spreads throughout gentile territory after Christ's death and resurrection.

Today's story is a story in which something out-of-the ordinary happens.

And it scares people.

Because people expect what ordinarily happens to happen next, and they fear what ordinarily happens.

But what ordinarily happens doesn't happen next. The usual fears people ordinarily have are unfounded.

Because Jesus himself is out-of-the ordinary.

Because Jesus doesn't operate in the ordinary ways the world ordinarily operates.

Because Jesus challenges what people ordinarily accept as ordinary, and what people expect as ordinary. Jesus challenges how people ordinarily think, how people ordinarily act, how people ordinarily treat other people, how people ordinarily wield power.

Jesus thinks, acts, treats people, and wields power in ways that are out-of-the ordinary.

Sometimes it takes people some time to wrap their heads and hearts around just how radically out-of-the ordinary Jesus is, and how radically out-of-the ordinary Jesus calls his followers to be.

Sometimes it takes people some time to stop fearing what they ordinarily fear, and to accept a new reality that's out-of-the ordinary.

The gentiles in today's story haven't yet wrapped their heads and hearts around everything that's out-of-the ordinary about Jesus. They need time.

And they haven't stopped fearing what they ordinarily fear. They need time.

It's still taking some of us, maybe all of us, time to really wrap our heads and hearts around just how out of-the ordinary Jesus is, and how out-of-the ordinary he's calling us to be.

It's still taking some of us, maybe all of us, time to really stop fearing what we ordinarily fear, and to accept a new reality that's out-of-the ordinary.

How much time do I need? Do we need, those of us who still need time?

I like to think that Christ has planted a seed within each one of us, and that we can blossom in Christ-like ways. That we can think, act, treat people, and wield power in ways that are out-of-the ordinary in the world we inhabit.

Let us pray to blossom. Let us pray to live a new reality that's out-of-the ordinary.