

# Sitting in the Gap Study Guide – June 23, 2019

## [Luke 8:26-39](#)

(Click on scripture above to link directly to each passage in the *NRSV* on [biblegateway.com](#).)

### **Suggested Study / Prep**

1. Read the passage(s) in several different translations and/or paraphrases (e.g. *NRSV* and *The Message*)
2. Read the provided commentary(s) below
3. Visit and explore some of the additional resources links (and/or explore your own commentaries, resources, etc)
4. Reflect on the provided questions
5. Generate your own questions and “wonderings”

### **Commentary on Luke 8:26-39**

(From *Homiletics*; “Titanic Possessions”, June 21, 1998)

The story of the Gerasene demoniac wields terrific and terrifying spiritual and psychological power as it touches on such issues as the Gentile mission, Jesus' messianic identity, discipleship, and even homiletics itself. We begin our brief study aware that absolutely everyone agrees that this story (which is found in all synoptic gospels) is an authentic Jesus story.

Healer/Messiah/"Son of the Most High," Jesus is revealed hanging out with the wrong type (a demoniac), in the wrong place (the Gentile lands "opposite Galilee"), at the wrong time (before any Gentile mission was established). But in the midst of all these social and ecclesial "wrongs," Jesus does everything "right." He heals, he banishes evil, he shakes up the local population, he changes the landscape, and he leaves an enduring visible and vocal sign of his work.

Luke's account emphasizes that Jesus has moved into foreign territory. The Gerasene's country is "opposite Galilee." This whole encounter takes place only after Jesus "stepped out" onto the Gentile side of the lake. The one possessed by demons is almost certainly a Gentile as well. Even if not, his demon-possession has rendered him unclean. He lives like an animal -- unclothed and outside. He chooses to locate in the tombs -- a ritually unclean place for Jews. So thoroughly polluted is this man and this environment that some commentators have suggested the entire story serves as a midrash on Isaiah 65:1-4 -- where Gentiles are portrayed performing any number of unclean acts -- offering incense to demons, sleeping among tombs, etc.

The demon addresses Jesus directly as the "Son of the Most High God" -- a title that was technically correct, but when used by Gentile hands in Gentile lands did not necessarily suggest the one God of the Jews. "Most High God" was a catchall title among the pagans applicable to any local deity.

Jesus quickly overpowers the sarcastic, sadistic spirit speaking from the possessed man by commanding the creature to give up its name. In ancient Near Eastern tradition, by naming any entity one gained power over it. Yet Jesus has this demon at his mercy even before knowing its name, for the Spirit provides this true "Son of the Most High God" with all the information he needs.

Legion knew immediately of their impending doom, for they beg Jesus not to "order them to go back into the abyss" (v.31). This "abyss" was the designated place of punishment and imprisonment for demons (Revelation 20:1-3). As an unclean spirit it was only natural that Legion request relocation into one of the most familiar unclean symbols -- swine. The presence of a nearby herd once again reminds us that Jesus is in the midst of Gentile territory.

Surprisingly, Jesus grants Legion's request. When the beasts go mad and plunge headlong into the depths of the lake, however, it seems Legion's strategy has backfired. In the Septuagint, the Hebrew "tehom," the flood, or watery deep, is also translated as "the abyss." Legion ended up in "the abyss" after all.

The firsthand witnesses to this exorcism and the demons' destruction run to spread the news "in the city and the country" (v.34). But the reaction of the populace is hardly gratifying. Confronted with the picture of this well-known raving demoniac sitting quietly at Jesus' feet "clothed and in his right mind" (v.35), the people become "afraid." Likewise, when they hear the details of the demoniac's healing, "they were seized with great fear" (v.37). The people's response to Jesus' miracle of transformation is to ask him to leave (v.37).

Why the fear? Was it uncertainty over the demons' complete and permanent demise in the lake? Was it anger over the loss of a large and valuable herd of livestock? Jesus' own reaction to the request that he leave reveals the most about the situation. Without any further comment to the crowd, without any additional words of preaching or teaching, Jesus turned his back on the Gentiles, "got into his boat and returned." Everyone has the right to choose. They choose fear over faith.

Luke ends the story by returning to a private dialogue shared between Jesus and the man he has healed. Now fully in his right mind, in his own mind, the man begs to be made a part of Jesus' team, to "be with him." But while Jesus refuses to allow the Gerasene to stay with him, he completes the man's rehabilitation. Jesus orders the Gerasene to return to his former home. And Jesus calls him to a new vocation, giving purpose and point to this man's now unfettered mind and unfurled spirit. Under Jesus' direct instruction, the Gerasene demoniac becomes the first missionary to the Gentiles.

## Additional Resources

- [The Text this Week](#) – a huge archive of commentaries, blogs, sermons, etc. Note – this site collects resources related to ALL of the lectionary texts for a given week...not all will relate to the passage(s) being studied, but many will. You will have to sift!
- Check out other commentaries available for this text (and others!) at [WorkingPreacher.org](#).

## Reflection Questions on Luke 8:26-39

- 1.** How do you read this account (and others) of demon possession and exorcism in the Bible? Shall we take these stories at face value and accept their description of these events? Shall we apply our modern understandings of psychology and seek to read and understand these events through such a lens? Shall we look for symbolic connections that might point to a larger meaning intended by Luke's author (e.g. the Roman political overtones suggested by the name "Legion")? How do our choices in understanding and interpreting such passages shape our understanding of Jesus' overall identity and ministry (and vice versa)?
- 2.** Why would Jesus grant the demon's request to be sent into the swine instead of into the abyss? (v. 32) Is there something more than meets the eye going on here?
- 3.** Consider v. 35. As the commentary above asks – *Why the fear? Was it uncertainty over the demons' complete and permanent demise in the lake? Was it anger over the loss of a large and valuable herd of livestock? Were they afraid of the demons? The formerly possessed man? Jesus? What was it about this remarkable incident caused observers to be afraid? Was their fear misdirected?*
- 4.** Consider these questions from Judith Jones, *workingpreacher.org* (June 23, 2019) and what they might mean for those of us who would seek to "continue the work of Jesus": *"How many people in our world are haunted by a traumatic past and tortured by memories? How many live unsheltered and inadequately clothed because of social and economic forces that they cannot overcome, no matter how hard they struggle? How many are imprisoned, regarded as barely human, excluded, cast out? How many are enslaved by addictions no longer knowing where the addiction ends, and their own selves begin? Where do the governing authorities separate people from their families, denying them the opportunity to seek better lives? Where do occupying armies still brutalize entire communities and hold them captive to fear?"*

**What questions do you have?**

**What do you "wonder" about when reading these passages?**