

“What Do You Want With Us, Jesus?”

A sermon¹ by the Rev. Dr. Jon M. Fancher

Rocky River Presbyterian Church, Rocky River, Ohio

Ash Wednesday—March 2, 2022

Psalm 51:1-10 (selected) CEB

51 Have mercy on me, God, according to your faithful love!

Wipe away my wrongdoings according to your great compassion!

2 Wash me completely clean of my guilt;

purify me from my sin!

3 Because I know my wrongdoings,

my sin is always right in front of me.

4 I've sinned against you—you alone.

I've committed evil in your sight.

That's why you are justified when you render your verdict,

completely correct when you issue your judgment....

7 Purify me with hyssop and I will be clean;

wash me and I will be whiter than snow.

...wipe away all my guilty deeds!

10 Create a clean heart for me, God;

put a new, faithful spirit deep inside me!

Matthew 8:28-34 CEB

28 When Jesus arrived on the other side of the lake in the country of the Gadarenes, two men who were demon-possessed came from among the tombs to meet him. They were so violent that nobody could travel on that road. **29** They cried out, “What are you going to do with us, Son of God? Have you come to torture us before the time of judgment?” **30** Far off in the distance a large herd of pigs was feeding. **31** The demons pleaded with him, “If you throw us out, send us into the herd of pigs.”

32 Then he said to the demons, “Go away,” and they came out and went into the pigs. The whole herd rushed down the cliff into the lake and drowned. **33** Those who tended the pigs ran into the city and told everything that had happened to the demon-possessed men. **34** Then the whole city came out and met Jesus. When they saw him, they pleaded with him to leave their region.

Jesus went into foreign territory. He went to the other side of the lake. The Jews lived on the western and northern sides of the somewhat triangular Sea of Galilee. But the eastern shore was where the people who weren't Jewish — the Gentiles — lived. The Gentiles may have worshiped Greek gods; they may have worshiped animals or mountains or carved monoliths. They certainly didn't believe that the living God of Israel had any claim on their lives.

When Jesus and his disciples climbed out of their boat, his disciples followed cautiously and with unease. They felt as though they were behind enemy lines or trespassing on private property. They climbed the hill rising up from the lakeshore. The rocky hill was covered with caves, some carved by nature, others carved by hand. These caves were tombs for the village which lay just beyond the crest of the hill. Even in

¹ Modified from my sermon originally preached February 25, 1998 under the title “Then They Asked Jesus, ‘What Do You Want With Us?’”

broad daylight, a cemetery was not the most comfortable place to be, and this was a Gentile cemetery! The disciples followed Jesus up the hill, hoping to touch the ground with as little of their feet as possible because this place just reeked of spiritual contamination.

Without warning, from a cave up ahead came a piercing “Aaaaauugh!” A wild man suddenly jumped out of the cave, then another. They were horribly remarkable: their scalps and beards were an unbelievable tangle of hair; they wore the filthiest rags which failed to provide them with modesty; their skin was scraped and bruised as though from flinging themselves against the rocks of tombs and paths and hillsides. They hardly made eye contact with Jesus or the Twelve. Their eyes darted from sky to the lake down below, then back to the tomb from which they had emerged. But then they stopped. With an intense stare they asked Jesus, “What do you want with us, Son of God?”

Jesus heard the cry of the men and the cry of the spirits which possessed them. The spirits were crying from within the captivity of their physical frailty, their emotional distress, their sin-prone thoughts. Their spirits were crying out because, to this point, they had found no way to be rescued from their captivity. They had encountered no power great enough to set them free and thus to free the men from the torture of their mental illness.

“You can free us!” the spirits of the two men cried out to Jesus.

Jesus said simply, “Go.”

And with that, the spirits which had tormented the two men, the spirits which had kept the two men from valuing themselves as God’s beloved creatures, the spirits which had kept them from cooperative, compassionate relationships with their families and friends, the spirits which had prevented them from worshiping the power of God – those spirits were released, expelled. Jesus directed the spirits into a heard of pigs nearby and, according to what the disciples reported later, that herd of pigs became so riled up that they ran headlong down the hill and drowned themselves in the waters of the Galilee.

Though the spirits had blocked them from recognizing and serving God, the two men were now freed. Healed. Restored. They abandoned living among the tombs and set off on a new life, perhaps returning to home and neighbor, perhaps choosing to follow Jesus himself.

Let’s realize, though, that not everyone was pleased by this episode. The herders whose swine were overcome by mad pig disease hurried off to the nearby village. They gushed, “There’s a sorcerer in the cemetery who is more powerful than any we’ve ever seen in these parts. He used no complicated spells or mystical formulas. He had no potions or gizmos. He simply looked at the Tombstone Twosome, said, ‘Go,’ and the evil spirits left them. They left them and entered our herd which is now floating feet-up in the lake.”

The townspeople agreed that this Jesus possessed more power than they were comfortable having in their village. But no one was quite willing to go up there and see

Jesus all by themselves... so the entire village went out and begged Jesus to leave that region.

Remember, when Jesus first encountered the twosome, they asked, "What do you want with us?"

We might ask that same question: What, Jesus, do you want with us tonight?

By and large, you are tuning in of your own free will. You have chosen to observe this first day of an artificial, invisible season created by the Christian Church. In other words, you want to be here. But why?

I believe you want to be here because you have seen yourself, and you're not entirely pleased with what you find. When you look at yourself you see a person who does not always tell or live the truth. You see a person who displays selfishness more frequently than you like to admit. You see a person who holds God at arm's length at times when it would be inconvenient, uncomfortable, embarrassing, or costly to embrace God's will for your life.

In short, you see a person who is only part of what God intends, but you feel powerless to make yourself whole. So you come this day asking Jesus to heal you:

- Ask Jesus to forgive you of the hurt you have caused others, whether intentionally or accidentally.
- Ask Jesus to give you the courage to forgive others, even though it might seem more bitterly satisfying to continue to hold that other person responsible for the hurt they caused you.
- Ask Jesus to strengthen you to remain faithful when you are tempted to worship the things of this world instead of worshiping the One who made the world.
- Ask Jesus to free you from your love of being in control over your world, so that God might regain full use of the gifts and abilities God placed within you.
- Ask Jesus to fill you with a sense of peace... and joy... and hope because our lives are lived by the transforming power of God's Holy Spirit.

What does Jesus want with us? Jesus wants to be our constant and reliable companion on life's journey of faith until, like Jesus, we are privileged to see God face to face.