

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, July 25, 2021**

**TRAVELS WITH JESUS:
CHANGED
Mark 5:1-20**

TRAVELS WITH JESUS: CHANGED

Mark 5:1-20

July 25, 2021

This is a message about change – more specifically, about the power of Jesus to change lives.

Heraclitus, the ancient Greek philosopher, observed that the only constant in life is change, and that you cannot step into the same river twice because, as the water flows, the river itself is constantly changing. Our way of life, from personal to political, from education to economics, from sexual mores to marriage and family life, from transportation to technology, from medical science to the media, from the invention of radio and TV to the internet, iPhones, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and Tik Tok, has changed radically in the last 100 years, and continues to change at a dizzying pace.

Not all change is bad. But not all change is good, is it? Sometimes change is exciting, something to be celebrated, as in the case of the ‘warp-speed’ development of vaccines to combat COVID-19. Sometimes, though, change is downright frightening. It makes us terribly uncomfortable. But it is a fact of life. And that, for better or us, is not likely to change.

In his famous Serenity Prayer, theologian Reinhold Niebuhr focused on the two sides of the coin of change: ‘God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.’ There are some things that you and I are powerless to change and some things that, in His providence, God chooses not to change. But what is impossible for us is *Himpossible* with God. You can’t look at what happened to the demonized man in Mark 5 and come to any other conclusion.

I have shared with you before a prayer of Peter Marshall that also addresses the need for change in our lives. Marshall prayed: ‘Lord, where we are wrong, make us willing to change; where we are right, make us easy to live with.’ That is a prayer to which I hope we can all say ‘Amen!’

We all know we have things in our lives that need to be changed. We all know we need to change in one way or another. Maybe it has to do with your attitudes. Maybe it is a lifestyle issue. Maybe it is your eating habits. Maybe you drink more than you should. Maybe there is a secret sin that has you in its clutches. Maybe it has to do with your

spiritual disciplines, or lack thereof. Maybe it has to do with how you treat the people closest to you, or people who are different from you.

Change is a fact of life. The need for change is a fact of life. That doesn't mean that change is always (or ever) easy or painless. Someone has said there is no growth without change, no change without loss, and no loss without pain. But ... To say it again, change is not impossible; it is *Himpossible* with God.

Today's Scripture reading from Mark 5 is a dramatic story of how an encounter with Jesus radically and forever changed the life of a man everybody thought was a lost cause. In typical preacher fashion, there are three points I want you to see today.

1. JESUS MAKES THINGS HAPPEN.

The first point is that Jesus makes things happen. When Jesus arrives on the scene, when Jesus enters the picture, when Jesus comes into a person's life, something is bound to happen. *Jesus. Makes. Things. Happen.*

The presence of Jesus – God-with-us, who made His home in the midst of ordinary people like us, full of grace and truth (John 1:14), who incarnated the love of God and the power of God and the gracious plan of God for our salvation – means that change is bound to take place. You do not meet Jesus face-to-face and stay the same. You cannot experience the beauty of His amazing grace and not be changed. Jesus makes things happen.

For example, Jesus came into the life of an enterprising and prosperous but unethical businessman named Zaccheus, and not only did Zaccheus begin going to church regularly, he changed the way he did business, because Jesus changed his heart (Luke 19:1-10).

Jesus met Mary Magdalene, a prostitute was purified and set free from the emptiness of a life of sin, and became one of Jesus' most ardent and faithful followers.

Jesus restored the sight of a man named Bartimaeus, and when he could see again, do you know what Bartimaeus did? He followed Jesus (Mark 10:46-52).

A devout Jew named Saul had an encounter with Jesus on his way to Damascus (Acts 9), where he was headed to persecute the followers of Jesus, hoping to destroy the burgeoning Christian movement before it could gain any more traction. When he met Jesus, Christianity's most vociferous enemy (Saul) became its greatest missionary, known to us as Paul.

A few weeks ago, I preached at my mother's funeral service in the church where I first met Jesus as an 11-year-old boy and received the gift of salvation and new life in Him. Perhaps the change in my life was not outwardly so dramatic as these cases from the New Testament, but it was – and is – every bit as real. At Mom's funeral service, I pointed out the place, at the front of that little church, where I opened my heart to the Lord Jesus in a

simple act of faith. As I was growing up in that rural community, I wasn't a bad kid, as kids go. But I knew myself well enough, at the age of 11, to know that I was a sinner who needed a Savior, and that Jesus was the only One who could save me from my sins.

When you meet Jesus and experience His grace in your life, when you know who He is, what He has done for you, and how much you matter to Him, you cannot remain unchanged. Jesus makes things happen.

Which He did in the life of the nameless man we meet in Mark 5. Last Sunday, in our chronicles of the travels of Jesus, we saw the power of Jesus over nature on display as He calmed the storm on the Sea of Galilee, as He and His disciples were traveling across the lake. In Mark 5, they arrive on the eastern shore of the lake, in a predominantly Gentile area with ten towns known as the Decapolis (which means, 'Ten Cities.'). As soon as Jesus got out of the boat, He was met by 'a madman from the cemetery' (MSG). This guy was a total mess; he was so overpowered by demonic spirits, so controlled by evil forces that he would have seemed to us to be more monster than man. From a human point of view, he was a lost cause. A hopeless case. There was no possibility of rehabilitation. He was out of control, a danger to others and a danger to himself. Satan had him right where he wanted him. He had made him into a hopeless, helpless, hapless, self-destructive, wild man. One writer (David Garland) describes him as a 'miniature Pandemonium' (Garland, *The NIV Application Commentary: Mark*, 203).

The word *pandemonium* was invented and first used by John Milton in 1667 in his epic poem, *Paradise Lost*. Milton gave the name Pandemonium to the capital city of hell. It was the place of all the demons.

The life of this man in Mark 5 was like a personal pandemonium. It was like all the demons of hell had taken up lodging in his life. Not all of them; just a legion, which in the Roman army consisted of 6,000 foot soldiers. This poor man was the embodiment of what it looks like when all hell breaks loose. What Satan had done to him, in an attempt to destroy the image of God in him, Satan would try to do to us, if he could.

Mark says in verse 4 that 'no one was strong enough to subdue him.' The word Mark uses (*damazō*) means 'to tame.' It is used only four times in the New Testament – here, and three times in James 3, where James talks about how hard it is to tame the human tongue and how deadly poisonous the tongue can be (James 3:7-8). No one had been able to tame this wild man.

His family couldn't handle him. The community couldn't keep him under control. So they did the only thing they knew to do. They threw him out. They banished him. They sentenced him to wander among the tombs in the cemetery in his loneliness and misery.

But then Jesus showed up. Jesus entered the picture and did what only God could do.

Just like Humpty Dumpty, all the king's horses and all the king's men couldn't put this poor man's life together again. No amount of spending, public or private, could fix what

was wrong with him. Money wasn't the answer. All the education in the world couldn't solve his problem. Social programs were not the solution. His life had come unraveled at the seams. His personality was so fragmented, so completely disintegrated, that he didn't even know who he was.

He was so confused that he recoiled in fear from the only person who had the power to help him. His perspective was so skewed that he saw the one true Friend he had as an enemy. When he met Jesus, he cried out in terror: 'What do you want with me? For God's sake, don't torture me!' (5:7)

He was saying: 'Leave me alone, Jesus! Mind your own business!' What he didn't understand, and what so many people today don't understand, is that people who are hurting, people whose lives are falling apart, people who are empty on the inside, people who are spiritually lost (regardless of how the world may view them), people who are headed for hell, *are* Jesus' business! And they are *our* business, too.

I can hear Jesus saying to him: 'Look, you don't need to be afraid of me. I'm here to help you, not to harm you. You. Matter. To. Me. I want to make you whole. I want to give you back your life. I want you to experience my peace. I want to deliver you from the hellish pandemonium you're experiencing right now.'

Only Jesus could do that. Only Jesus could put the broken pieces of his life back together. Only Jesus could restore him to his right mind and make him whole. Only Jesus could save him from destroying himself. Only Jesus.

If Jesus could change the life of this out-of-control madman – and He did – is anyone too far gone for the love of Jesus to reach them? If He could change this man's life, He has the power to change our lives, too. He has the power to change *your* life. He has the power to heal the broken places in your life. He has the power to put the pieces of a broken marriage back together. He has the power to heal the wounds that bring pain and heartache to families. He can heal the wounds in your life that just won't seem to heal. Jesus can bring a prodigal home. He can change the things in our lives that we have tried and failed to change on our own. He can give us the grace and serenity to accept the things *we* can't change and the power to change the things we can. *If* we let Him. *If* we surrender to His wise and gracious and loving rule in our lives.

When Jesus enters the picture, He makes things happen. He did it in the life of that untamable man in Mark 5. He still does today. He's got what it takes to change the things in us – in you and me – that we can't change. And even when change is slow and painful and hard, His grace is sufficient to get us through.

2. NOT EVERYBODY WANTS TO CHANGE

Sometimes, though, and this is the second point, people don't want to have anything to do with the change Jesus brings. Not everybody wants to change.

Not everybody who meets Jesus responds the same way. You can see it again in the pages of the New Testament. Some people, praise God, cling to Him with every fiber of their being and want to follow Jesus faithfully. Even when it means suffering.

Other people seem satisfied to keep Jesus at a comfortable distance – close enough to know He’s there, in case of an emergency, but far enough away that He doesn’t bother us or try to tell us what we should or should not do.

Still other people want nothing to do with Jesus. They do not see Jesus as the solution to the world’s problems. They see Him and His influence as the problem, maybe even the biggest problem in the world. They want absolutely nothing to do with the change Jesus brings. This demonized man was like that, until Jesus rescued him from the grip of Satan. And so were the Gerasenes, the people who lived in that region. Here was a man who had been miraculously healed. His life had been dramatically transformed. But a huge herd of pigs had been lost in the process, and they decided that the price of this man’s healing was too high. So they asked Jesus to go away. They asked Him to leave, because He was ruining their business.

This is not universally true, but the reason some people reject Jesus, or just go through the motions of being religious, is not because they don’t understand the gospel. It is because they *do* understand the change that Jesus brings when we open our hearts to Him. Real Christianity is not just a matter of believing the right things. Believing the right things *does* matter. Believing the essentials of the Christian faith *is*, well, essential. But there is more to being a Christian than just having the right beliefs. The gospel is not only an invitation to believe in Jesus for forgiveness and salvation. It is a call to let Jesus take over every part of your life. And some people are just not willing to do that.

A man named Paul Little was sharing the gospel with a college student, patiently answering every question and objection. When the young man had no more questions, Little asked him if he was ready to give his life to the Lord Jesus. The student said ‘No,’ and when Little asked him why, he said: ‘Because I don’t want to change the way I’m living. I’m sleeping with my girlfriend, and if I become a Christian, that would have to change. And I’m not willing to change.’

You may know people like that.

Not everyone wants to change. Jesus upsets the status quo of our lives. It is true. He calls our priorities into question. He challenges our values. The presence of Jesus means that things have to change, and some people, like the Gerasenes (and this college student), would rather hold onto what is familiar, no matter how futile and even self-destructive it is, than take the risk of faith and experience the fullness of life that Jesus brings.

The Gerasenes wanted nothing to do with Jesus. They wanted Him to leave. So Jesus left and went back to Galilee. Then, as now, Jesus wouldn’t stay where He was not welcome. He would not, and He will not, bash down the door of the human heart.

It is a tragedy, but the truth is that not everybody wants to change. Not everybody wants Jesus. Some, as the Bible makes clear, were, and are, determined to get rid of Him. It is a fact of life we have to face up to.

3. GO AND TELL SOMEBODY

The third point is that when you meet Jesus as this demonized man did, and He changes your life, just as He has changed the lives of many of you (all of you, I hope) by His grace, and as He has changed my life, He gives you a job to do. He wants you to go and tell others what He has done for you.

This changed man begged Jesus to let him go with Him. He wanted to join the band of Jesus' disciples and travel with Him. But Jesus said 'No.' Instead, He told him to go back home, back to his family and friends and neighbors, and to be in their midst a living, breathing, walking, talking witness to the power of Jesus to change lives.

How did he respond? He did what Jesus told him to do. He did what Jesus *commissioned* him to do. 'He went away and began to tell in the' ten towns of the 'Decapolis how much Jesus had done for him' (5:20a). And how did people react? 'All the people' who heard his story 'were amazed' (5:20b). As it says in *The Message*, he became 'the talk of the town.' Really, it was Jesus who became the talk of the town.

Most of us don't have a story of God's grace as sensational as this man. You may think your story is boring. We may think no one is interested in hearing our stories of what the Lord has done for us.

It is true that some people are not interested. Some people may find the story of God's grace and mercy in your life offensive. But some people *will be* interested. Some people *will* have ears to hear the message of the gospel. Some people will see evidence of the power of the gospel in your life and will want to know how to experience that life-changing power themselves.

* * * * *

So, what to do? Where does the rubber of this message meet the road of your life?

Maybe, as you examine your life this morning, you recognize that you need to change – or be changed – in some way from the inside out. Nothing you have tried has worked. You don't have the power to change yourself. Maybe the change you need is not as outwardly dramatic as the demonized man living in the graveyard. Most likely it is not. But you need Jesus to change you. If you ask Him, He will help you. If you trust in Him and put your life in His hands, He will transform your life. He will forgive you and change you. He will make you a new person on the inside. And it will show on the outside. He will do it now, if you ask Him.

Maybe Jesus has changed your life, and you have a heart for others who have not yet found the life of peace, joy, and wholeness you have found in Christ. Maybe God has placed someone(s) in your life who needs someone (like you) to point them to Jesus.

Wouldn't it be great if Jesus became the talk of the town in Kingstowne and all throughout northern Virginia? It will never happen if believers like us don't talk about Him.

If your story doesn't seem extraordinary, it is just possible that your everyday story may relate to someone else's everyday life and show them that they, too, need the grace of God and the power of Jesus in their lives.

Jesus wants you and me not just to live the change He has made in us, He wants us to tell somebody. He is counting on you and me where we live and work, as well as where we worship, to 'tell them how much the Lord has done for (us), and how He has had mercy on (us),' so that He can change their lives, too.

Never underestimate the power of a changed life. And never underestimate the power of Jesus to change lives.

Lord, let it be so in us. Amen.