

Helpless, Hopeless, Healed, Hired!  
Luke 8:26-39

Have you ever found yourself in some helpless state? Have you ever been caught up in some helpless condition? Have you ever been held fast in the grip of malignant forces beyond your power to control? Perhaps those forces were the forces of sickness – some sickness you just couldn't shake. Perhaps they were the powers of mental or emotional illness – some illness you simply couldn't manage or control. Perhaps they were the forces of divorce, or unemployment, or economic hardship, or loneliness, or isolation, or anxiety, or some other malign power that drained you of life's vitality and left you eking out some bare semblance of existence in the graveyards of despair. Perhaps even now you find yourself dwelling there.

If you've ever been caught in some helpless condition, held fast by malignant powers beyond your control, then you can surely relate to the man described in today's text. According to Luke, Jesus crossed the Sea of Galilee to visit the country of the Gerasenes. And there he met a man possessed by demons. Perhaps that was an accurate spiritual diagnosis. Perhaps the man truly was possessed by malign spirits. Or perhaps it was a first century description of some mental illness beyond Luke's knowledge to describe, so he used the language of his day to describe it. For, indeed the man's condition looks very much like a mental illness. Luke says, "For a long time he (wore) no clothes, and he did not live in a house but in the tombs." (Lk. 8:27)

Whether or not *his* was a case of mental illness, mental illness plagues many people today. According to the National Alliance on Mental Illness:

- Approximately 1 in 5 adults in the U.S. (46.6 million) experiences mental illness in a given year.
- Approximately 1 in 25 adults in the U.S. (11.2 million) experiences a serious mental illness in a given year that substantially interferes with or limits one or more major life activities.
- 1.1% of adults in the U.S. live with schizophrenia.
- 2.6% of adults in the U.S. live with bipolar disorder.
- 6.9% of adults in the U.S.—16 million—had at least one major depressive episode in the past year.
- 18.1% of adults in the U.S. experienced an anxiety disorder such as posttraumatic stress disorder, obsessive-compulsive disorder and specific phobias.<sup>1</sup>

Whether or not this man was suffering from demon possession, mental illness, or some other debilitating condition, his is a picture of utter and abject helplessness! He was

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.nami.org/Learn-More/Mental-Health-By-the-Numbers>

completely and wholly helpless. He couldn't bathe himself, clothe himself, house himself, or provide for himself. He was helpless – helpless indeed.

Now your condition may not be as dramatic or as desperate as his, but you may still feel helpless in the face of forces well beyond your power to control. Don't despair. Where there's life, there's hope, right? When you can't help yourself then you can always turn to others for assistance. If you're sick then you can turn to the doctor. If you're troubled then you can turn to the counselor. If you're needy, you can turn to some agency for assistance. You can always turn to others for aid. There's always hope. Right?

Yes, this man was helpless. But surely there were others who could help him. Surely his parents did all they could to help him deal with his affliction. And when their best efforts failed to have a positive effect, they most likely took him to the doctors and the counselors of their day. And what was the outcome of their efforts on his behalf? Their efforts failed, too. In fact, every attempt to help him failed in the end. There was nothing more to be done, so they bound him in chains and shackles and went on with life as best they could because his was a hopeless case.

Maybe you feel helpless and hopeless. You've tried everything and nothing has worked. Others have tried to help you and their efforts have failed, too. And so, like the man in our story, you've just about given up on things ever being better. But then Jesus entered the scene.

Jesus asked the man his name and the man said, "Legion" for many demons had entered him. (Lk. 8:30) And maybe like that man, you're wrestling with a legion of troubles and a whole host of problems of your own. Well Jesus spoke a word of command and the demons left him. And when we next see him, he's sitting at Jesus feet, clothed, and in his right mind. (Lk. 8:35) You see, he's been helped and healed!

Now there are two equal and opposite errors I think we should avoid as we interpret this healing story. First, we need to avoid the error of magical thinking. Magical thinking is the notion that if we just believe the right things, or do the right things, or say the right things, then we'll always get the right results. Magical thinking manifests itself in religion among those who teach the power of faith to always effect some specific positive outcome. If we just believe in Jesus then we'll receive from Jesus some specific blessing! If we believe Jesus for healing then we'll be healed! If we believe Jesus for wealth then we'll receive it. If we believe Jesus for victory (however defined) then we'll become winners! All we have to do is name it and claim it; blab it and grab it; it's all ours for the taking. And if we aren't healed or helped then clearly we didn't have enough faith to make it so.

Now that's magical thinking and it's the kind of thinking typical of small children. And we're not small children. So as we read this story we need to remember that there were a lot of sick people in Jesus' day that didn't receive the gift of healing. And there have

been many more since then who haven't been healed in response to their faith. But faith isn't magic. It's trust. It's belief in and dependence upon Jesus to see us through – yes, through – all the varied circumstances of life.

So we need to avoid magical thinking as we read and interpret this story. And we need to avoid mechanical thinking as well. Mechanical thinking is the belief that the universe is a closed system that operates according to fixed laws and mechanical principles. For the mechanical thinker, if there is a God at all, then that God created the world and wound it up like some mechanical clock that runs fine without any assistance, so God no longer intervenes in the running of it. For the mechanical thinker, this healing miracle either has some logical, rational explanation, or it never happened at all; it's just a bit of first century fantasy that we can dismiss as fable or falsehood – perhaps looking for some deeper spiritual truth contained within it. In other words, we shouldn't expect such things to happen today.

In opposition to magical and mechanical thinking, I believe we're called to embrace mysterious thinking. We're called to embrace a world of great mystery...an open world where God sometimes does intervene in ways we often don't expect, can't predict, and can't control, to do marvelous things expressive of his wonderful love and kindness. And because we live in such a world as this, a world of marvelous mystery, there's always hope that God might just intervene in some way, not necessarily our prescribed way, but some way, to heal or help us in this world where trials and troubles are sometimes legion!

Isn't that what happened to the man in our story. God came to him in Jesus Christ and did for him what no one else could do. He healed and helped him at an unexpected time, in an unexpected moment, in an unexpected way, and restored him to himself. Why he didn't do it sooner or in a different way is all a great mystery to me. But faith is trusting this God of mystery and walking with him come what may. And that's what we must do in all those times when we feel helpless and hopeless. For who knows? Maybe the mystery of healing or help will break upon us any moment – even this moment! And wouldn't that be wonderful!

And so the helpless, hopeless man in our story was healed. And after he was healed, he was hired to serve Jesus' cause with his healing story. For after he was healed, Luke says, "The man from whom the demons had gone begged that he might be with (Jesus); but Jesus sent him away, saying, 'Return to your home, and declare how much God has done for you.' So he went away, proclaiming throughout the city how much Jesus had done for him." (Lk. 8:38-39)

If ever there was a man who had little to offer Jesus then that man was this man. We don't know how long he had spent as a helpless, hopeless demoniac but the bible says it had been "a long time." (Lk. 8:27) It could have been years. It may have been all of his life. What could such a man offer in the service of Jesus Christ? What gifts or talents did he have to share? Probably none, except he could share his story. He could tell others

how much God had done for him. And that's something all of us can do! If we've been helped or healed by Jesus then we can tell others all he has done for us! That doesn't take a great deal of skill. It just takes a great deal of gratitude – gratitude for all we've experienced in our life with Jesus Christ.

But you and I have more to give than just our story, as important as that is. Unlike the demoniac, we have many gifts, talents, and abilities to employ in grateful service for Jesus Christ. As I look out at this congregation, I see people possessing many talents and abilities. I see people with PhDs, Master and Bachelor degrees. I see business owners and corporate leaders. I see nurses and therapists, coaches and counselors. I see professors and principals, teachers and school administrators. I see military officers and senior enlisted, fire fighters, rescue workers, and retired police. I see politicians, judges and government officials, bankers, financial advisors, and CPAs. I see carpenters and construction workers, IT experts and actors, realtors and pastors, journalists and leaders of various civic organizations. I see thousands of years of education, training, experience, and expertise. You see, we have a great deal to offer in the service of our Savior!

A few moments ago our Stewardship Chair encouraged us to use our talents in the service of Jesus. God's good work only gets done when we give our time to serve God and neighbor. If, like the man in our story, we've been helped or healed by Jesus Christ, then we should hire on as his grateful servants giving our time and talent to his employ. Whether volunteering through one of the many church programs that make ministry happen here at Mountain View, or volunteering through one of the many worthy charitable organizations in our greater community, I hope you'll give some time and talent to this aspect of your discipleship. You, the church, and the world, will be better for it!

Helpless, hopeless, healed, hired! That's the story of the man in our text. And it seems it's the story of us as well. Maybe that's why it's in the bible; for all of us have probably had times of helplessness and hopelessness. And all of us have had times of divine healing and help as well. So now it's time for hiring on in the service of our Savior. What gift, talent, or ability will you offer to him? You think about that. Amen.