

# Sermon Text for November 12, 2023

By Rev. Robert K. Bronkema

## **Leviticus 11:26-28, Matthew 8:28-34**

### **“When pigs fly”**

Welcome to our 191<sup>st</sup> birthday. There is so much to celebrate today. We have 42 members of this church who have been members for over 50 years. That’s enough to start a brand new church. A lot of churches around here haven’t even been around for that long, and 42 of you have stayed loyal to First Presbyterian. Thank you! We have a brunch and then a ribbon cutting on this birthday to celebrate your loyalty and to celebrate, most of all, God’s faithfulness to the work of His kingdom through your hands and your hearts.

We also, fittingly, have a baptism which marks the beginning of a new chapter in the life of the church as a family begins to make their story and their mark on this church as well. It is the first time that I am baptizing children of someone whom I have confirmed, married, and now here they are. Again, tracing the timeline of the family of God from birth all the way through to where we find new birth in the church again is exciting for me. I remember telling one of you that I want to be the one who marries your daughter as she finds herself embraced in the arms of a loving congregation. Some of here sitting in these pews can’t imagine what life might look like 10 years from now.

As you look around this church the 50 year members have seen some extraordinary changes, and I don’t mean just to the building itself. They worshipped here when the sanctuary was only as big as this expansion joint. They worshipped here when we had over 300 people in worship in a sanctuary this size, fellowship hall wasn’t around, neither was the foyer and the classrooms heading out to the parking lot. But you have seen children and adults come and go over the years. The impossibility of what we have going here is palpable. We should not be able to be doing this, we are bucking all of the trends.

Mainline churches are closing all around us, another Presbyterian Church, Mt. Joy, just closed this past week. This post-Covid reality is hard, it is really hard. But we continue to tick up week after week, adding new families and babies. But our emphasis has never been to increase in number. We have always wanted to emphasize our faith, what do we believe. We want to make all of us more mature in Jesus, and some aren’t crazy about that because it doesn’t allow you to be on the sidelines as a fan and just witness and spectate. It requires all of us to be on the field and participate actively in growing our faith.

As a result our goal is to make everyone all in not just in loyalty to the church, which you have shown over the years, but especially in loyalty and our discipleship and our following of Jesus. Let's read our second Scripture for this morning.

## **READ**

Welcome back to Matthew. The last time we were together in Matthew Michael Wilson took us on a boat with Jesus. By the way Michael is doing well, he is at home, it was a really scary week, but he is recovering well. We have seen the mount of beatitudes and Jesus teaching there, he comes down off the mountain and heals a leper and a centurion's daughter, and Peter's mother in law and he is becoming so popular and so sought after for his healing that he has to get on a boat and go to the other side.

Today we find ourselves on the others side, and it was a side that Jesus didn't spend a whole lot of time on. It was primarily a gentile side, and so not a whole lot of Jewish presence, and we see this with the pigs and the cemetery presence in the story. We do read that Jesus says that he has come to save the lost sheep of Israel and so it makes sense that he wouldn't spend a whole lot of time on the side where there weren't many Israelites, but rather mostly gentile, and when he is finished with the demoniacs he leaves right away, but for today, here he is.

He lands and there is no one there to greet him or to recognize him or to surround him and ask him to be healed, like there was on the other side, except for two people who were possessed by demons and they lived in a cemetery. Remember what a cemetery looked like back in Jesus' day. It wasn't a location with a whole bunch of tomb stones, rather it looked a bit like the badlands in the Dakotas with a series of caves where the bodies would be buried, just like Jesus was buried in a cave. A good place to spend your time when you are not welcomed in the town and there is no other place to find shelter, except with the dead.

We find this same story in Mark and Luke but with some significant differences in the details. We find in those Gospels that there is one demoniac and the demon identifies himself as Legion, the stuff of movies right? We see in the other Gospels that after Jesus casts the demon out of the man he wants to follow Jesus and be his disciple but Jesus tells him to remain where he is and minister to the people that he knows and stay home and tell them about the good news of your healing and how the Son of God gave you a new life. Stay on the south side of the tunnel and do your work there.

Matthew doesn't have any of that because he wants to emphasize the Son of God doing the impossible and how the details of the demoniac is not nearly as important as the details of what Jesus did and how he made the impossible happen. Let's look at the verses here, you see

that the two of them were preventing people from going to the cemetery because they were fierce and no one could pass that way. So who knows for how long people of the village weren't able to go see loved ones who had passed. Everyone in the town knew what was going on.

They come out to meet him and immediately begin to interact with Jesus calling him Son of God. There is only one other time in Matthew that Jesus is called Son of God directly by an individual. Guess who that individual is? Look at Matthew 4:3, and 6. It is the devil. How is it that we find that the devil knows who Jesus is before we do? How is it that the devil recognizes the power and the authority of Jesus before we are willing to accept him in our lives? The devil knows that he is threatened by the existence of Jesus and that Jesus is going to face evil head on and will cast it aside and drive it away from those whom he loves. But why does it take us so long to recognize our Savior when he is walking in our midst?

We then see the devil negotiate with Jesus, a bit like Jesus being tempted in the wilderness, and says, you are here too early, it isn't judgment day, hey, since you are here early, instead of completely casting us out and sending us to hell, can you send us into those pigs on the hillside instead? There is some serious negotiation taking place, it is not something I would recommend that we ever negotiate with the devil. Those pigs on the hillside.

One of the most interesting and informative field trips that I ever took in my time here in Strasburg was visiting the Meck pig farm. John Meck who is the pastor at Strasburg Mennonite, someone I would call a close friend, we dunked each other in the Jordan nearly 5 years ago, I asked him about 10 years ago or more if I could visit his pig farm. He said sure. I got there and the first thing I had to do was change into a hazmat suit in a separate room that adjoined the pens. Then this air jet thingy was turned on and we were able to walk into where the pigs were, hundreds of them. It was the most sanitary, safe, cleanest environment I have probably ever been in. There is nothing dirty about being a pig in the Meck farm.

So what's with our first reading that says that they are unclean and that the people of God were forbidden to even touch a pig, much less eat one? Well, that was a dietary law to prevent the people of Israel from getting trichinosis and dying en mass because they didn't know how to cook meat that could kill them. The dietary laws of the Israelites were given to the Jews to protect them really from themselves for a variety of reasons. This was lifted in the New Testament in Peter's pigs in a blanket dream.

So Jesus says a single word, Go!, and the demon goes into the pigs and they rush down the bank into the sea and they drown. We have been to the traditional sight of where this may have taken place and the location is filled with signs that say do not step off the road because

there are still land mines present. I get a bit of a funny image of the pigs trying to run down the hillside today and most of them not really making it, but let's stick to the story.

When this happens the herders, the shepherds of the pigs run back to the town and tell the people. The people come out and they do the same thing that the two demoniacs did. Look at vs.28 the demoniacs came out to meet him as he arrived, and the town people in vs. 24 all came out to meet him. And the ending of the story is not what you would expect. They ask him to leave. He just healed two of their people, he just opened up the roadway so that they could go and pay their respects to their loved ones at the cemetery.

Sometimes you get used to the status quo and would prefer the evil that is in your midst than a healing that might put your livelihood in jeopardy. Did you hear that church celebrating 191 years, sometimes we prefer doing things that might not be the best for the church but it is what we know instead of following the presence of the Holy Spirit that leads to healing and something new, but which might be risky and might lead us to losing something that we consider valuable, our resources, our safety, our way of life, our comfort. A relationship with Jesus provides gives us everything, but it also takes away that which poses a barrier between us loving him and loving our neighbor. Some of us don't want to lose that barrier, it is familiar.

Like the man at the pool of Siloam that Jesus healed who had been sick for so long that it was all he knew. Do you want to be healed? Sometime we don't want to be healed because we know how to live as someone who is sick. We prefer a demon possessed status quo than an unknown future with healing. Sometimes the church doesn't want to be healed because it knows how to live in conflict, but not in the presence of God. There is a very cruel reality to evil, and Jesus confront it head on.

In 9 years we will celebrate together the 200<sup>th</sup> birthday of this church. Our 6<sup>th</sup> graders will be out of high school for 3 years already, some of them might be married, and maybe even with a child. Our goal is to believe the impossible even at the risk of stirring things up, including taking risks that could cause that which we value to disappear into the bottom of the sea. Our goal as a church is to ensure that the Son of God is the one who leads us and be willing to cast out that which is evil in our midst, to stir things up, even if it means that our future might seem risky. You asked a missionary from Russia who is a Dallas Cowboy fan to be your pastor, what did you expect?

Believe that God is able to do all things through you and through us. Amen.