

***Finding the Little Bit of Blue Sky That is Always There Within Us***  
*a sermon delivered by the Rev. Scott Dalgarno on June 19, 2022*  
*based on Mark 5:1-20*

Back in 1991 I was offered a position as pastor of a church in South Oklahoma City. The draw for me was that they would allow me to do a PhD in literature at the University of Oklahoma while I was their pastor. It was also a place you could buy a house for next to nothing.

The ones we were most interested in were in a new development between Oklahoma City and Norman in a small city called, Moore. I ended up going to Ashland, instead. Eight years later every house we'd toured in the subdivision in Moore was obliterated by a tornado. Down to the foundations. Not a stick of wood remained. They rebuilt and then in 2013 it happened again with the exact same result.

Now to the text this morning -- this is one crazy story. It's a story of Jesus as a tornado. Instead of fixing everyone's problems, he leaves a path of destruction in his wake. Instead of feeding thousands of hungry people in this neck-of-the-woods, their food source, pigs, is driven off a cliff because of him. Instead of inviting a new disciple into the group, he refuses a man's plea to follow him.

No matter what perspective you look at this text from, it's a mess. From the point of view of the man who was hired to keep an eye on the crazy guy in the cemetery, he loses his job when the mad man is made sane. From the point of view of the townspeople, their source of current and future revenue just ran off a cliff. From the point of view of Jesus, he's asked to leave town. From the point of view of the demoniac himself, we don't yet have enough information.

How did he end up in a cemetery in the first place, one might wonder? Was he "normal" before that? It's worth asking because he probably once was just like the rest of us (semi-normal). If we don't ask such questions we will marginalize him. We will pretend he is different from us and be tempted to surmise that he deserves his sad fate. This is a convenient and self-serving strategy for a "normal" person, right? In reality it's a delusional way to live because some time, in most lives, 90% of us, maybe, we end up spending at least a season in a dark dark place.

Let me share with you a testimonial from an anonymous someone who has a marginalizing disease.

***WHEN YOU HAVE*** *Parkinson's disease and you live alone, you have to pay someone to clean for you, and sometimes you have to take Ubers to doctor appointments. This isn't cheap. You would like to get a roommate to share expenses, but you don't want to advertise on Craigslist, because you don't know what kind of person will respond. You find a website that matches women over fifty with roommates, but then you read the frequently asked questions, and it says they won't accept anyone with disabilities. One of the aides who helps you in your home says she has a coworker who might be interested in being your roommate. Then the aide sees you on a day when your meds are*

*not working so well, and you overhear her on the phone telling the coworker it would be too much trouble living with you.*

*When you have Parkinson's disease and your friends are getting together for lunch or to go shopping, they sometimes don't call you. It's not that they don't want to spend time with you; it's just more difficult when you're involved. You don't drive, so someone has to pick you up, and they have to choose a place that's easy for you to access. You don't get invited on trips to the mountains or the lake or the beach either, even though you'd like to see those places, too. You try not to be needy, but you feel less like a friend than an obligation. Friends do help you with errands; they just don't stay to spend time with you. They have other friends for that.*

*When you have Parkinson's disease, you hope for a new treatment or a cure. You don't want to be remembered this way, but you, too, are starting to forget the person you used to be. Even in your dreams you have trouble walking.*

Back now to the demoniac. He lived a terrible life. He was a despised outcast, but he meets a man who will not allow him to remain an outcast. That man, of course, is Jesus.

Note that this story does not stand alone in the gospel of Mark. It follows some wild happenings. Jesus is teaching and he's interrupted when his mother and brothers arrive and want to take him home to Nazareth because they think he's out of his mind. That's when he tells everyone listening that they are his real family. After that he's in a boat with the disciples and a storm comes up and soon his disciples rage at him for not caring about them enough because he's catching a nap. It's then that he stills a storm on the lake, amazing his friends. Directly after that he stills the storm inside the man with the demons. The two stories are literarily equal and are intended to go together.

They confirm that Jesus is, first, a peace maker -- someone with power to still inner and outer storms. Well, if there was a time we needed a peacemaker it sure would be now. As crazy as this world is, he, apparently, has the power to still our storms; the outside ones and the inside ones.

Our reaction to those storms is often fear. And as with the disciples' reaction, out of that fear often comes our assumption that the creator of the universe doesn't really care.

But Jesus confounds that assumption. Even in the midst of the greatest storm he finds a little bit of blue sky and makes of that, a peace. This is what I want to focus on this morning.

So, let me repeat that point. Even in the midst of the greatest storm, inside us or outside, he makes of that a peace.

Here's a story that the late spiritual teacher and psychologist, Ram Dass, loved to tell. Many years ago a woman phoned him at 2am. He was on the east coast, she was calling him from California. She said she was going to commit suicide. "I've gone crazy," she said.

Groggy from sleep, Ram Dass still found enough whimsy in his midnight reverie to say, "Look, you're obviously too crazy to talk to, so can I please speak to the person who dialed all seven numbers, plus the area code, because *that* person must have all her marbles?"

When Ram Dass would tell that story he would go on to say that he believed even in the craziest moments of our lives, even during the greatest storms, there is always "a little bit of blue sky" inside of us. We just need to recognize that fact and be willing and able to grasp it.

Here is how he put it more generally: "We often go along and we are 50% okay and then, "Ah here comes the depression." Or, "Here comes the grief, again," or, "Here comes my anxiety disorder." But look, there is always a part of you that is not anxious; not completely depressed; that little piece of blue sky."

The clearest Biblical illustration of this reality that I know of is inside Jesus's story of the Prodigal son. Remember how the young man does something unspeakable? He asks his father for his inheritance, admitting he wished his father was dead. Strike one. Then he goes to a foreign land and goes through the money quickly and on nothing but wild living. Strike 2. Then he takes the only job he can in that foreign land, feeding animals that back home they call unclean. Strike 3. Finally, smelling the awfulness of the slop he realizes just how far he has fallen, at which point he might just kill himself.

But Jesus says that, instead, "he came to himself" and he thought of a tiny sane way back in the direction of his old life. He will go home and not ask for restoration. No, he will just ask for a job on his dad's ranch. He must have been out of his cotton pickin' mind, but he reaches out of himself for some sanity; a measured response. He's done something unspeakable, but he believes he is more than something unspeakable. He is not, as we say today, the worst thing he has ever done in his life. And he knows it.

He is not the worst thing he has ever done.

That's what one should work to find in oneself. The part that is NOT totally compromised. Today so many of us tend to be over-anxious. We need to keep breathing.

We need to work to find moments of spaciousness so that then when our world begins to contract and we feel we are being sucked down a black hole we will notice it early and will ask, "Why is my heart closing down again?"

So, the first thing we need to do is notice when it happens and recognize that we need not give such suffocating movements full sway. I'm talking here about the ability to detach.

If you want a credible sense of what that might mean you will find it in Mitch Albom's book, *Tuesday's With Morrie*, about his friendship with his old professor and friend, Morrie Schwartz.

Morrie was suffering from ALS. The ALS would make him prone to swallowing wrong and choking. And the choking made him prone to panic. Morrie said, just to stay sane he had to learn to detach from the panic. And to detach from it, he found he needed to kind of embrace it first. Here is how he described it to his young friend Mitch.

"Detachment?" says Mitch, "Aren't you always talking about experiencing life? All the good emotions, all the bad ones."

Morrie agreed but said, "Detachment doesn't mean you don't let the experience penetrate you. On the contrary, you let it penetrate you fully. That's how you are able to leave it."

Mitch was mystified. Morrie continued: "Take any emotion. Love for a partner, or grief for a loved one, or what I'm going through, fear and pain from a deadly illness.

If you hold back on the emotions -- if you don't allow yourself to go all the way through them -- you can never get to being detached, you're too busy being afraid. You're afraid of the pain, you're afraid of the grief. You're afraid of the vulnerability that loving entails. But by throwing yourself into these emotions, by allowing yourself to dive in all the way, over your head even, you experience them fully and completely.

You know what pain is. You know what love is. You know what grief is. And only then can you say, 'All right. I have experienced that emotion. I recognize that emotion. Now I need to detach from that emotion for a moment. . . . I know you think this is about dying, but it's like I keep telling you. When you learn how to die you learn how to live.'

Morrie talked about his most fearful moments, when he felt his chest locked in heaving surges or when he wasn't sure where his next breath was coming from. These were terrifying times, he said and his first emotions were fear and anxiety. But once he recognized the feel of those emotions, their texture, their moisture, the shiver down the back, the quick flash of heat that crosses your brain -- then he was able to say, "Okay. This is fear. Step away from it. Step away."

"I thought," said Mitch, "about how often this is needed in everyday life. How we feel lonely, sometimes to the point of tears, but we don't let those tears come because we are not supposed to cry. Or how we feel a surge of love for a partner but we don't say anything because we are frozen with the fear of what those words might do to the relationship. Morrie's approach was the exact opposite. Turn on the faucet. Wash yourself with the emotion. It won't hurt you, it will only help.

If you let the fear inside, if you pull it on like a familiar shirt, then you can say to yourself, 'All right, it's just fear, I don't have to let it control me. I see it for what it is.' Same for loneliness: you let it go. If the tears flow, feel it completely-- but eventually be able to say, 'All right, that

was my moment with loneliness. I'm not afraid of feeling lonely, but now I'm going to put that loneliness aside and know that there are other emotions in the world and I am going to experience them as well."

So, detachment is the first step in turning anxiety or other negative emotions aside. And the way to get to that first step is to remember we are not total of our neuroses. Don't forget Ram Dass's bit of wisdom.

"We often go along and we are 50% okay and then, "Ah here comes the depression." Or, "Here comes the grief, again," or, "Here comes my anxiety disorder." But look, there is always a part of you that is not anxious; not completely depressed; that little piece of blue sky."

Amen