

Not What We Want

"Follow Me through Surprises" Series, January 11 & 12, 2024 | Mark 5:1-20

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What we get is not always what we want.

In our second or third Christmas as a married couple, Tammi (my wife) told me she wanted a tea set.

She wanted a tea set so that we could enjoy drinking tea and spending quality time together.

I wanted to give my wife a truly special gift that would let her know how much I loved her.

So, I shopped until I found a fine-china tea set that said, "Extravagant!"

When she opened it, her reaction was, "Oh." Instead of a tea set that said "Extravagant!", she wanted a tea set that said, "Together." The set I bought was all wrong.

So, after Christmas, I took the tea set back to the store, and we shopped together for the tea set she really wanted.

Sometimes we don't get what we want at Christmas or in life.

In a similar way, what we get from God is not always what we want.

There may be times when we ask for success in business but learn humility instead.

Or we may ask God for a spouse but get a friend.

Perhaps we have an illness and want to be healed, but we get strength to endure instead.

We may want a friend to come to Christ but get chances to share our faith and no results.

We may pray for peace but get help standing tall in the face of chaos.

God doesn't always give us what we want.

Even in the Gospels, Jesus doesn't always do what we want.

Early in the Gospel according to Mark, Jesus was drawing a growing crowd.

The disciples wanted Jesus to keep teaching, healing, and growing the crowd because that would launch the movement that might lead to the revolution that would overthrow the Romans, launch the Kingdom of God on earth, and make the world right.

Instead, Jesus went outside of town to pray and announced that it was time to leave and go to the other surrounding towns. There would be no revolution. No positions of power. No new world order. Not then. Jesus didn't do what the disciples wanted.

But that isn't the only time Jesus didn't do what people wanted. Jesus is full of surprises.

Will we follow Jesus through the surprises?

It happens in today's Scripture reading, and it happens in real life.

This is a question we have to answer, and Mark helps us to see why following Jesus even through the surprises is the right answer.

Jesus confronted evil with power.

Jesus landed in an unclean land.

It was the area east and south of the Sea of Galilee known as the Decapolis.

When the Romans took over the region, they separated it and rebuilt it into a pagan land.

You can tell how pagan it was from the massive herds of pigs near the shoreline.

Pigs were considered unclean by Jews. The Old Testament declared pigs “unclean.”

And pigs were despised at this time. In between the Old and the New Testaments, foreign kings tried to remake the Jewish people into Greeks. One king demanded that they eat pig flesh or die. So, pigs became despised symbols of paganism and persecution.

This was a dark and pagan place, but Jesus showed His power even in the middle of darkness.

Jesus confronted unclean spirits in a man.

As soon as Jesus landed, a man possessed by unclean spirits ran up to Him.

The demons had control of him—forcing him to do things, say things, and behave oddly.

The man roamed among the tombs and wild places outside of town.

People had tried to restrain him for his own good, but the demons made him so powerful physically that he could break the chains and shackles used to bind him.

He appeared to be out of his mind, and people were afraid of him.

Jesus confronted evil with power.

When the man came up to Jesus, Jesus was already commanding the spirits to leave him.

But the spirits inside the man tried to take control of the situation. They sensed the presence of Jesus and were afraid. This was their territory. Was Jesus there to take over? Or destroy them?

They acknowledged Jesus and called Him Son of the Most High God. They thought that if they could call Him by name, they could control Him.

Instead, Jesus demanded to know their name. They were called “Legion” because the man was possessed by many, powerful spirits.

They asked if, instead of going into the spiritual waste, they might possess a herd of pigs nearby. Jesus gave permission, and they departed.

Jesus defeated evil with the power of God.

Evil demands a powerful response, which is what Corrie ten Boom did during World War II.

Corrie ten Boom came from a devout Dutch Christian family that owned a large, rambling house where they lived and worked.

During World War II, the Nazis invaded. They enforced martial law, and violence against Jews began. Jewish-owned businesses were vandalized; synagogues burned; people disappeared.

Nazism is an evil that demands a powerful response from true Christians.

And Corrie ten Boom’s family was full of true Christians, so they responded. Powerfully.

Family members did join the resistance, and they used their sprawling house to keep resistance members safe, to house Jews, and to get Jews to safety elsewhere.

Corrie ten Boom and her family responded to evil with a different kind of power. But evil is not always met with power immediately.

Do you ever wish God would confront the evil in your world with power?

We see Jesus confronting evil with power on the shore of the Sea of Galilee today.

Do you ever wish God would do more of that?

I'm sure there are evils you know about that are big and powerful.

But that's not always what God does.

Even when Jesus confronts evil with power, His actions don't always match our expectations.

What Jesus did was not what the man wanted.

The people of the area asked Jesus to leave.

When the demons went into the herd of pigs, the pigs stampeded headlong down a nearby slope into the sea and drowned.

The herdsmen went to nearby villages and told people.

People came to see for themselves. Pig carcasses were probably floating toward shore, and the man who had been a violent lunatic was now dressed and in his right mind.

People were afraid. What would happen next?

They didn't know and didn't want to find out and begged Jesus to leave.

But the man who had been set free from the unclean spirits wanted to be with Jesus.

As Jesus was getting into the boat, he asked to go and be "with Jesus."

He wanted to be a disciple. Disciples are those who are "with Jesus." Think back to **Mark 3:14-15** when Jesus selected the twelve:

And he appointed twelve (whom he also named apostles) so that they might be with him and he might send them out to preach and have authority to cast out demons.

This man begged Jesus to let him leave his old life behind and come be with Jesus.

Instead, Jesus told him to go home.

He was to go to the people who knew him before and let them see what God had done.

Tell them about Jesus!

It wasn't what the man wanted, but that's what Jesus told him.

Have there been times when God has done what you didn't want?

You asked God for one thing and got another. That happens.

Some people will tell us that it's a lack of faith on our part.

Others will claim that it's proof that God doesn't exist, doesn't care, or isn't good.

It's none of that. God is under no obligation to do what we want, the way we want, when we want it. To put God under that kind of obligation is to make ourselves gods and reduce God to a slave.

What God did next with Corrie ten Boom was not what she wanted.

Someone tipped off the Nazis that her family was involved in the resistance and harboring Jews.

The Gestapo raided the home. They didn't find the people the family was hiding.

But they arrested most of the family anyway.

Most were eventually released, but Corrie's father became sick in custody and died. Corrie and her sister, Betsie, were taken to prison and ultimately a concentration camp.

Betsie died in that concentration camp.

None of that was what Corrie wanted, but God doesn't always do what we want.

What God does is sometimes not what we want.

Somebody lost a lot of money on pigs that day!

There were two thousand pigs in that massive herd that the unclean spirits possessed.

All of them died, and Jesus didn't save the pigs.

Someone may have been financially ruined, and Jesus didn't prevent that loss.

Jesus didn't come into the world to stop all suffering, to prevent all losses, or to destroy all evil here and now. That's coming, but it hasn't happened yet.

It may not seem fair, but what seemed like a financial disaster was part of something much bigger—Jesus demonstrating His authority over evil everywhere.

Jesus demonstrated His power even over a legion of demons in a Gentile land.

Jesus had already demonstrated His power by casting out demons in Jewish lands.

Here He took things to a whole new level: He cast out a legion of demons—all at once.

And Jesus did this outside of Jewish lands. By casting out a legion of demons in a pagan land, Jesus showed that He is God, Who reigns over Israel and over every land, and can defeat darkness anywhere. There is no place and no situation beyond His authority.

And Jesus went to that spot seemingly for one man.

Jesus was not surprised by the demon-possessed man.

Nor was He caught off guard by the rejection of the people. They didn't thwart His plans.

This one man's life figured into a bigger picture.

That one man became the first missionary—a Gentile missionary to a Gentile land!

By the beginning of Mark chapter five, Jesus had not yet sent any of His disciples out on mission to represent Him in the world and proclaim the Good News.

In the next chapter, Mark chapter six, Jesus will send His Apostles out two-by-two on practice mission trips with training wheels and a leash!

But here, before any of that happened, Jesus sent out His first missionary—a Gentile doing missions in the Decapolis. That's remarkable!

But God's plan is always bigger than we can see in the moment.

From our point of view, this is all about a man, a herd of pigs, herdsman, and the crowd.

It's a success, kind of. But we can also look at it as a massive failure. Two thousand pigs died, the herdsman were afraid of Jesus, and the whole region was put off by the Savior.

That's frequently how we look at similar moments in our own lives when what God does is not what we want. We see disappointment, if not outright failure, and ask, "Why, God, why?"

But God's view is always bigger, and His plan covers things we cannot imagine.

The first Gentile missionary was sent out that day with powerful validation of the Good News that he would then preach to a dark, Gentile land.

God did something bigger than we noticed at first. That fact speaks to us and calls us.

Trust God's plan even when it's not exactly what we want.

Corrie ten Boom's story has one more chapter.

She survived the concentration camp, but God was just getting started with her. She made a home for other concentration-camp survivors and resistance fighters.

She preached forgiveness and had the opportunity to live out forgiveness.

In 1947, she was speaking at a church in Germany about forgiveness.

Afterward, a man in a grey overcoat approached her, and she recognized him. In her mind she was immediately back in the concentration camp in a room with harsh overhead lights, a pile of dresses and shoes in the middle of the floor, walking naked in front of this man.

He admitted that he was a guard at the concentration camp but did not remember Corrie.

He had become a Christian since that time. He had asked God to forgive him for the cruel things he had done but was hoping to hear it from her as well. He extended his hand and asked, "Will you forgive me?"

She stood there motionless with her own hand glued to her side for what seemed an eternity to her. Then, with prayer she mustered the sheer willpower to put her hand into his.

That's when something flooded into her.

With tears she said, "I forgive you, brother, with all my heart."

None of this was what Corrie ever wanted, but God used her to reveal His power and grace in bigger ways than anyone could have anticipated.

Her experience made her a powerful advocate for forgiveness, peace, and the Gospel.

Many people came to Jesus Christ and to forgiveness because of her.

God's plan was still at work!

Recently I shared a principle with you that I hope you remember: We don't always get what we want, but we get exactly what we need.

That's the manna or daily-bread principle from the Bible.

There are things we want, and we don't always get them the way we want, when we want.

God doesn't promise that we will get everything we want, the way we want, when we want.

But God does promise that He will give us everything we need.

That's what God did in the wilderness for the children of Israel as they wandered forty years.

And it's what Jesus told us to pray in the Lord's Prayer: "Give us today our daily bread." Daily bread is what we need for today. God will give us everything we need. For today.

That's an important principle to remember when God's doesn't do what we want.

Today's passage today adds a second principle: God isn't building our kingdoms; He's building His.

Jesus didn't go to the Decapolis to heal every disease, fix every problem, or secure prosperity for every single person. He could have!

Jesus didn't cross the water to save a herd of pigs or the financial stability of their owners.

Jesus didn't even go to the area to make life perfect for a man who had suffered terribly.

And the same is true of us!

Jesus isn't going to make all healthy and wealthy. He isn't going to make all of our problems go away. He isn't going to make the world as it is into the world as it should be. Yet.

God isn't building our kingdoms. He's building His Kingdom, and we see that in the passage today. Jesus was sending a missionary to the Decapolis to open it to the Gospel and to Jesus.

Jesus was building God's Kingdom then, and He's doing it now, too.

We may not see it from our vantage point, but that's what's happening.

I find it very comforting to know this when I don't get what I want, and I hope you do too.

Also remember: the story isn't over.

There is a day coming when Jesus will return and defeat evil finally and forever.

When He does, He will wipe away all our tears and make the world as it is into the world as it should be. And we will live with Him. Forever.

That's God's plan. And it isn't over. Not yet.

We're called to trust that plan and God Whose plan it is.

God, we see, is powerful—more powerful than we can imagine.

He is able and can defeat evil any time.

And He will. He WILL defeat evil and make the world as it is into the world as it should be.

The story is not over. Not yet.

God is still at work, building His Kingdom.

And He gives us everything we need for today. Just not everything we want.

We can trust that. We can trust Him.

Let's trust God's plan even when He surprises us, even when it's not exactly what we want.