

OPENING:

An older pastor once said that, in 40 years of ministry, the three most frequent questions that he got asked were:

- 1) What happens when I die?
- 2) Can I lose my salvation? AND
- 3) What's the deal with those pigs?¹

The story of the Gerasene Demoniac is a strange one, with chains and demons and pigs falling off of cliffs. What does it mean to us in 2022?

You might recall that, in the famous novel *The Catcher in the Rye*, Holden Caulfield, the protagonist, has this to say about our Gospel reading:

“I like Jesus and all, but I don't care too much for most of the other stuff in the Bible. . . I like almost anybody in the Bible better than the Disciples. (And) If you want to know the truth, the guy I like best in the Bible, next to Jesus, was that lunatic and all, that lived in the tombs and kept cutting himself with stones. I like him ten times as much as the Disciples . . . “²

Maybe here's a way to think about our story and even a way to answer our pastor's 3rd question.

CATCHER in the RYE:

To refresh our collective memory: in *The Catcher in the Rye*, the character of Holden Caulfield has been kicked out of multiple boarding schools, he curses constantly, drinks too much, and has no respect for authority.

Caulfield is the 'Rebel without a Cause', the adolescent bad boy, the 'Bart Simpson' of the 1950s, the disillusioned teenager of any generation with his hat turned backwards, who launched a thousand imitators and millions of high school essays.

¹ Andrew Wilson "Pigs to the Slaughter." *Christianity Today*. (July/ August 2018) 28.

² Salinger, J. D. 2018. *The Catcher in the Rye*. 130.

For Caulfield, the confused nature of the world, the “phoniness” that came with being on the precipice of being an adult, not to mention all those confusing hormonal signals, caused such a conflict within him that he cannot make sense of it all. The modern diagnosis might be ADHD, anxiety, depression. But if you were to ask Caulfield to name his problems he might only say: “LEGION.”

Is it too much of a stretch to say that the reason that he feels close to the Demoniac is because he too is possessed by demons?

A comparison between the Gerasene, who has been exiled by his community, clothed in nothing but chains and possessed by voices, and this prep-school kid with an attitude problem and an existential crisis might seem a bridge too far.

But they both do need healing, even if of a different sort.

SALINGER:

Here's another way to compare the two: J.D. Salinger, the author of *The Catcher in the Rye* carried a draft manuscript of his future masterpiece with him when he served in World War II. Salinger participated in the Normandy Invasion, landing at Utah Beach on June 6, 1944. Behold that image for a moment, almost 80 years later, this classic of American literature being a physical part of the invasion force that scaled those dangerous cliffs to defeat Nazi Germany.

All across Europe, Salinger carried what would become *The Catcher in the Rye* with him, constantly writing, even as danger was all around him.

The book was there for the liberation of Paris, for the deadly battle of Hürtgen Forest, and then the book and Salinger were there when U.S. forces liberated the Concentration Camp at Dachau. “You could live a lifetime,” he later told his daughter, “and never really get the smell of burning flesh out of your nose.”

This all started to take its toll on Salinger.

Serving as an intelligence officer, Salinger’s job was to identify and capture Nazi collaborators among the French citizens. At one point, Salinger captured one such collaborator but a nearby crowd quickly caught wind of the arrest and descended on them and wrestled the prisoner away from Salinger, and then the crowd beat the man to death.

Sound familiar? As Salinger and the Allied Forces were, so to speak, driving demons out of occupied France and Europe, where were those demons going?

The demons had been pushed off the cliff, but like they did for so many veterans of that war and others, they became lodged elsewhere, in this case, in Salinger's self.

So Salinger was alone on V-E Day, as Germany surrendered and all celebrated. He sat on his bed, staring at a .45-caliber pistol clutched in his hands and asked: "What would it feel like if he were to fire the gun through his left palm?"³

Now, eventually, Salinger recognized the potential danger of his state of mind and sought treatment in a psychiatric hospital. But another form of healing was to finish his book, *The Catcher in the Rye*, which is about teenagers, but is actually a war story.

Salinger wrote a book about a young man who was enclosed in a tomb of doubt, pain, and insecurity. Caulfield had experienced death and a loss of faith, similar to Salinger. He felt shunned by society and incapable of being helped.

They exist then on some continuum: Holden Caulfield, the fictional character, J.D. Salinger, the creator of that character and war-weary veteran, and then the Gerasene Demonic—all three suffering from intense pain, seeking salvation and healing.

GOSPEL:

Scholars are often trying to apologize for Jesus' behavior in our story, or explain how it certainly could not have happened historically, that the events are some metaphor explaining Jesus' power or the forces opposed against him.

I think that the more and more we learn about mental health, about PTSD, about our need for scapegoats in society, the more we can accept stories like this one.

In our political world, this occurs as we vilify the Other in order to find a convenient target to explain our problems. Closer to home, this happens all the time in families as a particular family member carries some ailment (imagined or otherwise) that keeps the family together. It's called the "identified patient" in family systems theory, and it allows the rest of us to live in stasis, having isolated the problem in someone else.⁴

³ Kenneth Slawenski. January 20, 2011 "Holden Caulfield's Goddam War" *Vanity Fair* <https://www.vanityfair.com/culture/2011/02/salinger-201102> (Accessed 6/22/2019)

⁴ Gary Hall "4th Sunday after Pentecost" (June 20, 2010) www.figbag.blogspot.com/2010/06/homily-fourth-sunday-after-pentecost.html (Accessed 6/22/2019)

Thus, we don't need to participate in a war or rub shoulders with demons in order to experience this story. In fact, 65 million copies sold of *The Catcher in the Rye* might prove the universality of what's going on here.

CONCLUSION:

But to return to our question, what's the deal with the pigs? What do we do with this story?

I don't know if I am going to give you a satisfactory answer about that, other than to tell you something that you probably already know: that there is evil in this world and it can persist in surprising ways, and that wounds can morph and change as they scar.

Famously, Salinger's creative output dried up as his fame increased. He tried Yoga, a series of faddish diets and religious influences, psychics and then Scientology. He became a recluse, shunning interviews and photographs, withdrawing further and further into himself until he died in 2010. The demons seem to persist, like the pigs in our story, as his life would be collateral damage from what he experienced.

Salinger, my sense is, did not find the type of peace that his greatest creation, Holden Caulfield, achieved. Remember the title of the book (Spoiler Alert!) how Caulfield wants to be the rescuer, the savior of all the little children playing in the field, "The Catcher in the Rye", making sure that they don't fall off the nearby cliff. So this story reminds us of the power of pain and hurt and how even its memory can morph and linger and still do harm.

Jesus provides the model for how to address that reality, and it's by naming the problem, in that society and in ours.

Jesus always takes that step when he heals, by being honest about a problem. There is something about that process of diagnosis, of providing a treatment plan, and accessing a community going through the same thing that gives life and often heals. The alternative—the Gerasene's Demoniac's understanding of his self as: "LEGION"—is always worse.

Furthermore our faith offers that certainty...

that Jesus has come to be that Fall Guy,

he has come to be that Scapegoat, that sacrificial lamb.

In this story, he does not fall over the Cliff with the Swine, but he will,

he will replace the Demoniac, take his spot in the tomb, and forgive and heal us all.

AMEN