

LIVING IN THE SHADOWS

The Shadow of Fear

Matthew 8:23-34

March 1, 2026

Their boat is disappearing beneath the waves. The disciples are not weekend anglers—they are seasoned fishermen. They've spent their whole lives on this lake. Now they are convinced they're going to die on this lake. And Jesus is asleep, apparently indifferent to their imminent demise.

Lord, save us! We are perishing!

You know the prayer. It's the prayer that rises when the prognosis is devastating, when the marriage finally fails, when you're lying awake at 3 AM, your mind racing toward the worst-case scenario. It's a prayer, but it's also a kind of accusation. The unfiltered charge of one who feels abandoned in the shadows.

Save us! Don't you care?

Silently, Jesus rises. He speaks one word to the wind with an unsettling audacity. Suddenly, the sea goes flat. This is not a pause in the wind. It's an eerie unnatural stillness. Matthew calls it a dead calm.

The sea is still, but the fear only intensifies. The disciples were terrified of the storm. Now they are terrified of this man they thought they knew. But suddenly the stakes have been raised. The disciples understand a raging sea. They know what to do. You bail and you row and you pray. But a man who speaks and the wind and the water obey? That's a whole different kind of threat.

The storm was a danger to their lives. **Jesus is a danger to their world.**

The boat bumps against the shore. From storm at sea to stench in the graveyard. This is Gentile territory—the "other side" of the sea. And as soon as they step off the boat, the shadows shift.

Two men come howling out of the tombs. They were the local embarrassment, the town's open wound, a problem not solved but skirted by cold, calculated avoidance. You know, take the long way around, adjust your commute, tune out the screams from the cemetery.

Then Jesus arrives, and the demons recognize him instantly. *What have you to do with us, Son of God?* They already know what the disciples are trying to grasp, trying to understand.

They attempt to negotiate, but Jesus casts them out with a single word. *Go.* There's a rush of pigs down the bank, into the sea where they drown. And the men—these two men who terrorized the town, who were themselves terrorized—are suddenly set free.

And perhaps you'd expect a celebration. The terror that haunted that cemetery is gone. The road through that part of town is safe again. But the whole town gathers, and with one voice, in one unanimous vote, they beg Jesus. *Leave our town. Leave our town. Why?* Because Jesus is a wrecking ball; he is **a danger to their world.**

Look at the pigs. A whole herd gone. Jesus freed the men and destroyed an industry in the same breath.

We do the math too. Whenever transformation comes with a price tag, we calculate the cost. And sometimes we decide that the pigs are worth more than the person. Sure, it was a miserable arrangement, but at least it was stable. The suffering of strangers can be preferable to the disruption of change. The fear of chaos now gives way to fear of the cure.

The demoniacs were manageable precisely because they were possessed. As long as they stayed in the

tombs, the situation may have been tragic, but at least it was contained. You could pity them from a distance and then go home by a different road and lock your doors. You could be compassionate without being disrupted.

But look at them now. There they are, standing in the town square. Clothed. Coherent. In their right minds and no doubt looking for a meal, or a conversation, a community, a place to belong.

Here's the truth we must confess: it is easy for us to love from a distance. But whenever Jesus heals people, whenever in the Gospels Jesus heals people, he brings them close. He turns "those people out there" to "our neighbors right here." And that's when we begin to have our doubts. On second thought, maybe better for this foreigner from the other side of the sea to go back where he came from. They begged Jesus. *Leave our town.*

Because beyond the fear of the storm, beyond the fear of the demons, there is a fundamental fear he forces us to face. If this man can calm the sea, if this man can heal the broken, what else might he see? What more might he ask? And what if he turns his vision toward us?

The townspeople were not possessed, but they weren't free either. And maybe they realized if this man can see and speak to demons, he can see right through us, too. Maybe they knew their status quo could not withstand his presence. **Jesus is a danger to their world.** Better to send him away.

So they beg him to leave. And—here's the heartbreak—he goes. He does not resist. He does not argue. Jesus will not force his grace on those who prefer their pigs. He will not stay where he is merely a guest of our convenience. He will not bless our careful compromise with captivity.

The townspeople had their reasons, and so do we.

The polite, cultural Christianity of the past half-century is emptying out. Maybe we should let it go. It offered a kind of throw-pillow Jesus—decorative, comfortable, carefully coordinated so as not to disturb our decor. But a faith that demands nothing eventually means nothing.

Now, don't be fooled by the alternative. Right now, there is a loud, clanging cymbal kind of Christianity that has deftly swapped the cross for a battering ram. They march Jesus into places of political power like a captured mascot, this beautiful faith we all love fashioned into a weapon for a war our Lord would never wage. They speak of their courage, but all I see is white-knuckled fear, that frantic grasping of people willing to burn the graveyard down just to keep the demons quiet.

Same fear as the townspeople. Louder megaphone.

In the boat, the disciples feared that Jesus was too weak to save them. In the town, the citizens feared he was too strong to be managed.

Whether we retreat to our sanctuaries or rush to the barricades, it's the same fear, the same move. We want to keep Jesus contained. We want to keep Jesus on our side. We want to send him away when he starts making trouble...for us.

We all want a God who's on our side. Our prayer is for a God who sees what we see, who fears what we fear, who hates what we hate. A God who shows up when we need an ally and stands down when we need a lesson. But that's not the Jesus who shows up on the shore. This is a God we cannot control. **A danger to our world.**

Jesus refuses to be an accessory to lives devoid of deep meaning. He'd rather we be free than powerful. And we've never quite forgiven him for that. And so, yes, we too send him away. Not out loud. We're polite people. We quiet quit. We find a church that won't disrupt us. We domesticate his transcendent truth. We fashion a God, we craft a God, we make a God that is just large enough to meet our demands and just weak enough to go along with our plans. It's a faith thin enough to be safe.

But listen to this. A faith thin enough to be safe is too thin to save us. We must confess that sometimes we don't even want to be saved. We want to be stable. We prefer our pigs. Our profits. Our prejudice. Our power. We choose managed torment over disruptive grace. We would rather be comfortable in our chains than frightened by our freedom.

Managed torment. You know managed torment. It is the soul-crushing job that you hate, but you stay because the status and the security are too high a price to pay. You know managed torment. It's the family dinner where everyone stays silent about the addiction or the abuse because a stable lie carefully contained is easier to manage than an intrusive truth set loose. You know managed torment. It is the political tribe we cling to even when it requires us to abandon our conscience or ignore our God, so terrified are we of being cast out of the club. We'd rather keep the demon we know than accept the Savior insisting we start over.

But Jesus will keep sailing through our storms. So, keep walking toward the tombs—the ones our economy depends on, the ones our politics ignore, the ones where people are still screaming while the respectable world carefully takes the long way around. Jesus simply will not turn away from the tormented. He simply refuses to ignore the oppressed.

And so, my friends, the question is not whether he is dangerous. Of course he is. The question is simpler and more terrifying than that. Knowing what you know, will you let him stay?

Grace is not a siege. He will not batter down your door. He will not guilt you into transformation. He will never shame you into surrender. All he will do is look at you with full knowledge of everything you protect, everything you deny, and everything you are afraid to lose—and he will wait.

Will you let him stay? Will you let him disrupt your life? Will you let him change your heart?

When I was in the fourth grade, I begged my parents for a puppy. I was organized and made a presentation. I wore them down with a long list of promises. I shared nineteen life lessons I would learn if only I had a puppy.

So, Smokey was mine, which meant the dog duties were mine. What I didn't anticipate was the falling darkness. We picked Smokey up in September—my birthday—and not long after, we moved the clocks back. Suddenly evening chores happened after sunset. Smokey's pen

was at the bottom of a hill, far from the house. Every night after dark, I would sprint down that hill, heart pounding. I would pour the food out into the bowl and run back up the hill as fast as I could.

For weeks, I ran down the hill and back up again. One night I made it to the top, out of breath, and I'm not sure why, but I turned around. And here's what I saw. My father was standing at the back door. Just out of sight. Watching. Waiting. And that's when it hit me. He'd been there every single night. I just hadn't seen him.

He's been there in every fear. Every night you ran. Every moment you clung to control. Every time you tried to manage the storm. **Jesus is a danger to your world.** He is standing on the shore. You can send him away. Or you can let him stay. Amen.