

NAMING THE DEMONS

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Luke 8:26-39 (NRSV)

Then they arrived at the country of the Gerasenes, which is opposite Galilee. [27] As he stepped out on land, a man of the city who had demons met him. For a long time he had worn no clothes, and he did not live in a house but in the tombs. [28] When he saw Jesus, he fell down before him and shouted at the top of his voice, "What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I beg you, do not torment me"-- [29] for Jesus had commanded the unclean spirit to come out of the man. (For many times it had seized him; he was kept under guard and bound with chains and shackles, but he would break the bonds and be driven by the demon into the wilds.) [30] Jesus then asked him, "What is your name?" He said, "Legion"; for many demons had entered him. [31] They begged him not to order them to go back into the abyss.

[32] Now there on the hillside a large herd of swine was feeding; and the demons begged Jesus to let them enter these. So he gave them permission. [33] Then the demons came out of the man and entered the swine, and the herd rushed down the steep bank into the lake and was drowned.

[34] When the swineherds saw what had happened, they ran off and told it in the city and in the country. [35] Then people came out to see what had happened, and when they came to Jesus, they found the man from whom the demons had gone sitting at the feet of Jesus, clothed and in his right mind. And they were afraid. [36] Those who had seen it told them how the one who had been possessed by demons had been healed. [37] Then all the people of the surrounding country of the Gerasenes asked Jesus to leave them; for they were seized with great fear. So he got into the boat and returned. [38] The man from whom the demons had gone begged that he might be with him; but Jesus sent him away, saying, [39] "Return to your home, and declare how much God has done for you." So he went away, proclaiming throughout the city how much Jesus had done for him.

A STRANGE STORY

One way to write a good sermon is to think about the passage from the perspective of one of the characters in the story. So, in preparation for today's sermon I asked, "With whom do you identify in today's lesson?"

And as I examined that passage with this question in mind I realized that I don't identify with anyone in this story! I have a hard time connecting with this passage. This story is just too strange.

Though this story is told in three of the gospels, I don't have one sermon in my files on this passage after 26 years in the ministry and with good reason. In the past I thought that this passage was just too hard to preach on.

So, I thought that maybe this would be a good Sunday to hear a nice sermon from the Old Testament or maybe one of the epistles of Paul. But, I've become a bit more adventurous or maybe foolish in my old age so where angels fear to tread, this preacher rushes in.

OUR NAME IS LEGION

And since we are getting in over our heads this morning, today I want us to take an even bolder step. I not only want us to think about this dramatic and difficult story; I also want us to identify with the most unusual person in the story, the man who was possessed by demons. I want us to consider the possibility that our name is Legion because we too are possessed in many ways.

Now, I now, some of you are thinking that I've gone too far this time, that we have nothing in common with this man. Believe me. I understand your concern.

This story with its bizarre emphasis upon demon possession and exorcism is not a part of my experience ...except for perhaps a few bad movies that I watched in an ill spent youth.

Thankfully, I haven't met anyone running around buck naked in the cemetery, and certainly nothing like that is in my background. (Although I do remember some young men running doing that at college ...streaking they called it.) But, by and large we don't run into this on a daily basis.

I have met some folks who thought that they were possessed by the devil, but that was when I worked at the mental health center. My prescription for that was not exorcism but psychotropic medication and group therapy to help relearn social skills!

And so, if I'm to preach on this passage, I need to find another angle. I need to make the

transition from the first to the twenty first century.

THE DEVIL WITHIN

There are some who quite frankly don't want to do that. They want to go back to the first century and talk about the influence of demons and devils in the world. In fact, they tell me if I don't believe "in the devil" that I'm not being faithful.

In my experience those who insist upon talking about evil in a first century way use this otherworldly evil as an excuse for their own bad behavior. Many of us remember the late comedian Flip Wilson in his portrayal of the Rev. Leroy. He had a famous line that always brought down the house, "The devil made me do it."

It was really funny because it was true. Most of us knew someone who used that kind of illogic. They blamed the devil for their own bad behavior. A first century view of mental health can help us shirk responsibility for our actions.

If we're possessed by demons, then surely no one can hold us accountable for things that we do. In fact I found that many people with serious mental problems often used religion in this way. The devil made me do it was not just a funny line; it was what they believed. And it was evil. It kept them in bondage to their own delusions.

I believe that most often the real demon is not the one who comes from the abyss below but from the abyss within. It comes from some unresolved grief or guilt. It comes from dysfunctional relationships with a spouse or parent. It comes from drug or alcohol abuse. It comes from immoral behavior

We have many demons in our life, and they are legion. But, often we are not able to name the demon. We are not able to understand why our life is sometimes so unsatisfactory.

WHEN PREACHING FLOPS

Some of you may have noticed an editorial in yesterday's newspaper by David Brooks entitled, "When Preaching Flops". As you might expect, that title caught my attention. Brooks was talking about the fact that moral education often fails because it is based upon a false model of human nature.

He said that we assume if we fill human beings with moral maxims, don't do this and don't do that, and give them information as to why a particular behavior is not in their best interests and the interests of others that they will respond appropriately. We assume that human beings are rational deciders.

That's not true. Our actions are often dictated by unexamined generalizations and theories that we have about the world. And all the information, the data that comes our way is filtered through these unconscious ideas.

And the theories vary according to our histories. For example, a young man who comes from a broken home is likely to view his girlfriend differently from a young man who grew up in happier home.

There are some people who keep making the same mistake over and over again in their relationships. It's not because they are stupid or that they just can't say no. It's because their life is being controlled by this unexamined theory of life. And in my opinion, this can be demonic indeed.

A STORY OF SALVATION

That's why I think it's important that we take a symbolic approach to this passage. I don't think that we're being less faithful by looking at this story in this way. I think that many of the stories in the Bible were meant to be understood in this way.

You've heard this many times before, but it bears repeating. The Bible is not a science book. The Bible is not a textbook on mental illness. The Bible is a book about faith.

The Bible is a powerful story of salvation and how even the most tortured souls can be

released from bondage. We might not know what it means to be demon possessed, but all of us know what it means to have demons that control our life.

I've told you before that another cardinal rule of preaching is to always keep the emphasis upon Jesus and what he can do. In many pulpits (and in our pulpit now thanks to a gift from one of our members) there is a sign that says, "Sir, we would see Jesus."

That's the key if we are to understand today's text. This is a story about the salvation that comes in Jesus and not a story that explains the existence and nature of evil.

I liked the way my theology professor used to put it. "We don't believe in the devil. We believe in Jesus Christ."

Some might think that this is just a clever use of words, but I think it really gets to the heart of the matter. The cure for all of us is not to be found in focusing on those outside forces that we can't control. The cure is not to become fascinated with evil and all its exotic forms!

The cure is to be found in putting our faith in Jesus. We tell Jesus that our name is also Legion, that we too have many things in our life that prevent us from being who we are called to be.

And it is that honest to God approach that makes healing possible. As Jesus healed a demon possessed man long ago, Jesus has the power to remove the demons from our life as well.

JESUS CONFRONTS OUR DEMONS

A professor once told me that we shouldn't be too concerned if we recognized our own behavior as we studied abnormal psychology. The difference between "us and them" was not a matter of kind but a matter of degree.

I think that's true. All of us are filled with demons that are hard to name. All of us do things that we don't want to do. We eat too much or drink too much or talk too much or whatever. Our relationships are not what we want them to be.

We may not be as isolated from others as the mentally ill, but we too have many demons that threaten us at every turn. And all of us are tempted to run away from the world in order to keep from confronting our demons. We are tempted to isolate ourselves from those things that make us afraid.

Isn't that what the man in our lesson for today did? His bizarre behavior isolated him from everyone else. He couldn't be controlled. He lived alone on the edge of town in the cemetery, a place that evoked fear and sorrow. In this place considered unclean and devoid of hope Legion lived.

It was the perfect place for this man to reside. When people saw him, they were afraid. They ran away. And so this man did not have to confront his legion of demons. He lived with them. They became a part of his life.

Even when Jesus, the Son of God came to him, this man was not ready to welcome the salvation that Jesus brought. In fact, he saw Jesus as a threat. The demons inside him said "Leave me alone. Don't give me a hard time!"

Why did the demons say that? The Bible tells us that the demons knew that Jesus was about to kick them out. The exorcism would not be an easy experience. Exorcisms are never an easy experience.

But, when Jesus comes he brings salvation. He wastes no time in commanding the demons to leave.

In response to that threat the demons plead to enter a herd of pigs instead of the abyss, and Jesus obliges. He sends the evil spirits into the pigs, and then the pigs run headlong into the bank and are drowned.

Many folks are disturbed about this part of the story. It wasn't fair that these swine herders lost their livestock. And I guess the story does tell us that there is always a cost to healing the demon possessed. We might well ask ourselves if we are really willing to pay the price necessary to make deliverance from the demons of our society a real possibility.

But, the destruction of a herd of swine would not have been a big issue to a Jewish audience in the first century. In fact this would have been a rip-roaring story to tell around the campfire. You see, pigs were not kosher food. They were considered unclean and would only be raised in the godless, pagan world.

What better place for unclean spirits to meet their demise than by voluntarily entering some half crazed pigs? Jesus not only defeated the dark spirits in this man, he humiliated them, emphasizing his power even more.

Like the story that precedes this one when Jesus stills the storm, the reader is left to contemplate with fear the question, "Who is this that can command the wind and the waves? Who is this who can even bring sanity to the craziest man in town? Who is this that humiliates the forces of evil?"

One commentator summarized well how the life of this demon possessed man was changed by Jesus. He went from living outside the city to living inside the city. He went from living in tombs and being driven into the desert to living at home. He went from being naked to being clothed. He went from being crazy to being sane.

The transformation is breathtaking. More than that, the transformation is so great that the people are actually frightened. They can't handle it.

NAMING THE DEMONS

Can we handle the transformations that Jesus might bring into our life? What was true long ago is true today as well. Jesus will not let us cling to our demons for even a moment. As soon as he enters our life Jesus is ready to exorcise our demons. And as it was long ago that can be a costly and even frightening act.

They might be demons, but they're our demons. We know them. We're comfortable with them. Our demons keep us from confronting those unpleasant things that we would rather not face. We often don't want to pay the price it would cost to confront our demons.

A good example of the spiritual and psychological benefit of naming the demons in our life is found in the program of Alcoholics Anonymous. The first step toward being delivered from alcohol dependence is to quit making excuses for their behavior and say in a forthright manner, "My name is And I'm an alcoholic."

It takes courage and faith to name the demon and forthrightly admitting that there is a problem in our life that we can't deal with. It takes courage and faith to say that our life is out of control and only God can put it right again.

It's amazing how alcoholics can go for many years ... sometimes all their life ... and never make this admission. And it's amazing how we can go many years living in a way that is destructive to ourselves and the ones we love and yet not be able to acknowledge the demons in our life.

A MODERN DAY EXORCISM

The noted author, John Killinger, tells a powerful story about a man who is all alone in a hotel room in Canada. The man is in a state of deep depression. He is so depressed that he can't even bring himself to go downstairs to the restaurant to eat.

He is a powerful man, the chairman of a large shipping company but at this moment, he is absolutely overwhelmed by the pressures and demands of life... and he lies there on a lonely hotel bed far from home wallowing in self-pity.

All of his life, he has been a difficult and demanding person, worrying about everything, anxious and fretful, always fussing and stewing over every detail. And now, at mid-life, his anxiety has gotten the best of him, even to the extent that it is difficult for him to sleep and to eat.

He worries and broods and agonizes about everything, his business, his investments, his decisions, his family, his health, even, his dogs. Then, on this day in this Canadian hotel, he craters. He hits bottom. Filled with anxiety, completely immobilized, paralyzed by his emotional despair, unable to leave his room, lying on his bed, he moans out loud: "Life isn't worth living this way, I wish I were dead!"

And then, he wonders, what God would think if he heard him talking this way. Speaking aloud again he says, “God, it’s a joke, isn’t it? Life is nothing but a joke.”

Suddenly, it occurs to the man that this is the first time he’s talked to God since he was a little boy. He is silent for a moment and then he begins to pray. He describes it like this:

“I just talked out loud about what a mess my life was in and how tired I was and how much I wanted things to be different in my life.

And you know what happened next? A voice!! I heard a voice say, ‘It doesn’t have to be that way!’ That’s all.”

He went home and talked to his wife about what happened. He talked to his brother who is a minister and asked him: “Do you think it was God speaking to me?”

The brother said: “Of course, because that is the message of God to you and every one of us. That’s the message of the Bible. That’s why Jesus Christ came into the world to save us, to deliver us, to free us, to change us and to show us that ‘It doesn’t have to be that way.’

A few days later, the man called his brother and said, “You were right. It has really happened. I’ve done it. I’ve had a rebirth. I’m a new man. Christ has turned it around for me.”

Killinger said that the man is still prone to anxiety. He still has to work hard. But, now he has a source of strength. During the week, he often leaves his work desk and goes to the church near his office. He sits there and prays. He says:

“It clears my head. It reminds me of who I am and whose I am. Each time as I sit there in the Sanctuary, I think back to that day in that hotel room in Canada and how depressed and lonely and lost I felt and I hear that voice saying: It doesn’t have to be that way.”

IT DOESN'T HAVE TO BE THAT WAY

Do you have a legion of problems in your life? Do you fuss and fume about everything? Do the demons in your life threaten to overwhelm you? Are you isolated from the ones you love because of your fears? Have you even wondered if life is worth living?

Jesus comes to tell you that it “doesn’t have to be that way.” No matter how many demons are in your life, you are not beyond saving.

And the first step in your salvation is to allow him to name the demons. The first step is to discover those self defeating attitudes that keep you from being the person you are called to be. And this will enable you to go from just reacting to situations to being a person who makes informed choices.

Some see a conflict between science and religion, but I think this is a case where science and religion complement each other. Psychological health and spiritual health come together when the demons in our lives are named. We can truly seek the divine only when the deadwood of faulty assumptions is cleared away. Otherwise what we think is faith is only our own fears obscuring a view of the truth.

And as Jesus put it long ago, “The truth will set us free.” God grant us the courage to see the truth about how we really are today and who we are called to be in Christ Jesus.

Amen.

[../index.html](#)