

Luke 8:26-39

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.

## UNCLEAN MAN IN AN UNCLEAN LAND

In today's story Jesus has just crossed over the Sea of Galilee to the land of the Gerasenes.

That's important. Jesus is not just crossing the sea. Jesus is crossing a significant cultural boundary. He's entering Gentile country.

No self-respecting rabbi would take his followers there. But, Jesus does.

And when they get there, immediately a man who is possessed confronts them.

Actually he's more than possessed. He's occupied.

This man isn't just possessed by one spirit. He's possessed by a legion of spirits. A Roman army legion had 6,000 soldiers. So, this man was possessed by a legion of evil spirits.

Suffice it to say that he was really messed up.

The man is also quite frightening in appearance. He's not clothed. (In Mark's gospel we learn that he's self-destructive. He's cutting and hurting himself.) He is definitely a danger to himself and to others.

Instead of living in a home, he's wandering the tombs, a place of utter desolation. In short he is the definitive example of an unclean person in an unclean land.

## TOUCHING THE UNTOUCHABLE

And as soon as Jesus and the disciples come ashore, he comes running toward them shouting, "What have you to do with me Jesus, Son of the most high God?"

I'm sure the disciples wanted to run away. People always wanted to run away when they saw this man. Like many with his affliction he was unpredictable and super strong.

The scripture tells us that they tried to lock him up. They put him under guard and bound him with chains, but to no avail. He would break the

bonds and escape, and the demons in his life would drive him into the wilderness once again.

No one could hold him. No one could help him.

That's what the people believed, and that's what this man believed as well. He told Jesus, (or was it the demons who told Jesus, with him it was hard to tell), anyway he said,

"Please don't torment me with your attempts to heal me. Just leave me alone."

But, Jesus does not leave him alone. Jesus saw more than a dangerous man who is possessed by demons. Jesus saw a man who was all alone and needed help, help that only God in Christ could give.

#### DEFINED BY DEMONS

Jesus asks, "What is your name?" And the man answers, "Legion, for we are many."

This is perhaps the saddest part of the whole story. The man doesn't even know his name because he is possessed by so many demons.

Jesus asks, "Who are you?"

And the man can't answer the question. He doesn't know who he is.

He is captive to so many demons that his own identity has been lost.

In fact the man is named by his demons. The man is named by what robs him of joy and health. Those things that keep him from experiencing life in all its abundance have come to define him.

At first blush this seems like a strange, exotic story, a story that belongs in the ancient world instead of our world. We don't seem to have much in common with this man. We aren't filled with a legion of demons are we?

In fact I suspect that many of us here today don't even believe in demons.

But, maybe this story is more relevant than we think. Consider this.

The demons that Jesus confronts have three things in common.

First, the demons cause self-destructive behavior in the victim.

Second, the victim feels trapped in that condition.

And third, the demons separate the victim from the ones he or she loves.

Does any of that sound familiar?

I don't know about you, but I have some of those demons in my life. And I know many other people who struggle with those same demons.

If we define demons as those forces that have captured us and prevented us from becoming what God wants us to be, then this story becomes very familiar and very relevant.

Our demons may have different names, but the result is the same.

Our demons are legion, and they often prevent us from living an abundant life. We still allow our demons to name us, to define who we are, and the result is still tragic.

I have found that many people, even successful people define themselves in terms of their deficiencies, their disappointments and their failures.

Their life is not all that it could be or should be because they are possessed by a legion of demons, demons that hold them back and destroy their sense of self.

**WE NEED MORE**

Our culture exploits and even promotes this sense of lack. Advertisements are designed to create a powerful sense of insecurity. We aren't safe enough. We don't look good enough. We don't have enough stuff.

The cute little girl in the commercial captures our anxiety about stuff. An adult asks the children why “more” is better. And she says with an air of frustration and impatience that was undoubtedly learned from the adults in her life,

“We need more ... because we need more. We need more ... because we need it.”

She can’t verbalize why we need more, but she is sure that we need it.

That’s the logic of those demons that trade upon our deficiencies. And all too often we succumb to the attack. We allow those demons to name us ... and chaos ensues.

How many things do you have at your house that you don’t really need? Why do we buy all this stuff? Could it be that we have believed the message of the demons, that we are insufficient, that we need more?

No, this is not just a strange story that happened long ago. This is a story about us here and now. We have allowed the demons to name us, and the demons are legion.

But, Jesus wants to set us free. Jesus comes to us. Jesus crosses the sea for us and makes us whole. How does that happen?

## THE COST OF EXORCISM

Look at how Jesus healed the man in our story for today.

Jesus healed the man by casting the demons out of his life.

In this case the demons were cast into a herd of swine and the swine ran headlong over the cliff into the lake and were drowned.

The swine of course were not kosher.

The pigs physically represent the unclean spirits that have entered them. What better place for unclean spirits to meet their demise than by voluntarily entering some half crazed pigs?

But, this exorcism comes at a price. The destruction of this herd may have represented a significant financial loss to the people in that area.

When the people heard about what happened they came and found Jesus and the man who had been possessed sitting at the feet of Jesus, clothed and in his right mind.

But, the people were not pleased with what Jesus had done.

The possessed man was scary, but Jesus was even scarier. The power of God was in Jesus, and that was just too awesome for them to contemplate. And perhaps this healing came at too high a price with the loss of the swine.

In the story that precedes our lesson for today Jesus' disciples are threatened by a storm as they cross the Sea of Galilee. In fact they think that they're going to drown.

They wake up Jesus (who can apparently sleep through anything) and cry out for salvation. And Jesus stills the storm.

The Bible says that he "rebuked the wind and the raging water." It's the same word used when Jesus would heal someone from demon possession.

And how do the disciples respond to their deliverance?

The Bible tells us that they respond with fear. They are terrified. They ask,

"Who is this guy? Who has the power to command the wind and the waves?"

Apparently the power of God's salvation as revealed in Jesus is a two-edged sword. You are not only saved from what threatens you, but you are also threatened by what saves you.

Maybe that's why the Gerasenes begged Jesus to leave.

He was upsetting their way of life.

His intervention in the life of this one demon possessed man had broader implications, and that scared them to death.

## ONLY ONE MAN HEALED?

So, they begged Jesus to leave. And Jesus complied. Jesus got in his boat and left.

When you think about it, that means all Jesus did in the land of the Gerasenes was heal this one possessed man.

I wonder. Did Jesus really make this dangerous detour into this strange and unfamiliar place just to heal one man?

I think he did. And I believe Jesus is still doing it.

Jesus is still crossing boundaries and touching the untouchable. Jesus is still coming into our failure ridden and guilt ridden lives to cast out demons.

Like he did long ago, Jesus heals us by casting the unclean things out of our life. And then Jesus heals us by giving us a new identity.

Jesus tells us that our name is not Legion. We are not captives to the demons of fear and self-loathing.

We are God's children, saved by grace.  
That's the whole point of Jesus' ministry, to tell us ... or rather to show us just how much God loves us.

I said that Jesus only healed one person in the land of the Gerasenes. But, I wonder if that's really true. I wonder about the rest of the story. What happened after Jesus left?

The Bible tells us that when Jesus got ready to leave, the man who had been healed begged Jesus to let him get in the boat and go back to the other side.

But, Jesus wouldn't let him do that. Instead, Jesus told the man, "Go home and tell your people what God has done for you."

And so the man went to the city and told his story. He told them about Jesus.

The people knew who this man was. But, it was also plain that now he was completely different. He had a new identity.

I wonder how this may have affected his community.

I suspect that many believed in Jesus because of the powerful witness of this one man. He told his story over and over again. Even before he died, maybe at a ripe old age, the story still had power. Lives were still being changed.

And then one day when the Luke, guided by the Holy Spirit, collected the stories about Jesus, he included this story. And this tale of salvation became a witness to God's grace and power to the whole world.

Long ago Jesus touched an untouchable, but the power of his salvation stretched far beyond the healing of one man.

#### A NEW NAME, A NEW CREATION

Every church owes its existence to the testimony, to the witness of those who have been saved by Jesus.

When God delivers us from our demons it changes not only our lives but also the lives of those around us. It creates a new community that is open to the possibility of God's salvation.

It creates a new community that dares to live by faith and grace.

In this story we learn that the demons do not get to name us. God in Christ names us.

If we want to know our true identity, we need to remember our baptism.

What do we say when we baptize someone?

When we baptize a child we give them their Christian name.

We name the child for God.  
We say this is God's child.

When we baptize an adult we say this convert is God's new creation.  
We say this person belongs to God.

And when we lose our way, when we feel trapped by our past and are uncertain about our future, we need to come back to church to have those demons cast out and our identity restored.

We have to be reminded of just how much God loves us.

There are still many voices trying to possess us in the modern world. They are indeed Legion.

But, those voices are drowned out by the still, small voice of the one who crosses the sea to tell us of God's love.

He casts out the voices of despair and calls us back to our right minds.

Brothers and sisters you are not defined by your fears and your failures. You are defined by the love of God as revealed in Jesus Christ.

In Jesus we are given a new life.  
Thank God for that.

Amen.