

SERMON
The Reverend Dr. Phebe L.McPherson
Luke 8:26-39

Jesus asked him, "What is your name?" He said, "Legion" ; for many demons had entered him.

Who says reading Scriptures is boring. It's anything but! I remember being entranced when I first read about David in the Jewish Scriptures. A ruddy young man defeating the giant Goliath with a few smooth stones. A young musician and poet soothing the old king. A military might — "Saul has killed his thousands but David his ten thousands." A young revolutionary hiding out in caves, amassing followers, a hero-in-the-making, a little like Robin Hood. A young leader dancing in front of the Ark of the Covenant! A young king himself, gazing across the rooftop and seeing Bathsheba, bathing. Making mistakes. Confessing. Regaining God's favor.

Sounds to me like storyboards from a Netflix or Showtime series—or even HBO's drama series, Game of Thrones. Today's Gospel is right out of The Walking Dead. In case you didn't catch the nine season, top-billed, Number One series—It is a gritty drama that portrays life in the months and years that follow a zombie apocalypse. A group of survivors find themselves constantly on the move in search of a safe and secure home. But the pressure each day to stay alive sends many to the deepest depths of human cruelty and they soon discover that the overwhelming fear of the other survivors can be more deadly than the zombies walking among them. Nine seasons as the number one television series. I watched two of them, recently. Pretty awful stuff. I confess—I watched because, as most of you know, this past May the musical I've been working on had a 29/ Hour reading in NYC. Our general managers told me that the director would be David Alpert. I looked him up online. What popped up was the producer of The Walking Dead. Zombies? The show is brutal! It wasn't until a few days later, after watching the show that I thought there must be some mistake. And there was! Another David Alpert is a director with a a very different track record on Broadway. Embarrassing! But even more embarrassing to admit that until then, I'd never heard of The Walking Dead series. What lengths the movie industry goes to, and audiences support, to be entertained. If that is entertainment!

Looks to me like a similar storyboard in the Gospel of Luke. Enter, a man from Gerasene, who was possessed by demons. Tormented, nude and in chains, homeless, living among the tombs—the man sees Jesus and runs straight toward him. He falls down and screams, “What have you to do with me, Jesus?” Unafraid, Jesus asks him, “What is your name?” This is no ordinary upset man— “Legion,” he says. For “legion” means that he is possessed by many demons—“Legion” referring to a Roman army unit of about 6000 soldiers. The man calls himself Legion, but that is not his true name. Like the zombies—that is not who he is, or was. This is what has become of him—what has happened to him. Demons, then and now, are sign and symbol of the emotional and spiritual disruption—the “dis-integration” of our lives. Like seeing 6000 distorted images of yourself in a broken mirror. Take a special note that this is what is said about children who have been abused. Their ego breaks into hundreds of pieces as a way to survive. What has happened to this man? He has been overrun. He is divided and separated. He is fragmented and fractured. Disrupted. Overwhelmed. Broken into 6000 pieces.

Luke may be drawing this picture as a way of describing the condition of the whole Jewish community living under Roman occupation—the spiritual diagnosis is the same for the community as it is for an individual. This man is lost to himself. He has no center. He no longer understands who he is. He is without an identity. He has been dispossessed of himself and his humanity. His life has been shattered into pieces. He is alien to himself and alienated from his life. All this leaves him vulnerable, naked, exposed, and unclothed. He no longer lives in a house in the city, but in the tombs. He is in essence, dead to himself and to others.

If you have lived long enough you have probably looked in the mirror and not recognized the person you see. One day we all look in the mirror and say, “Who am I? “I don’t recognize myself. What has happened to me? Our head is filled with conflicting thoughts and voices. There are times when we lose our bearings in life and no longer know who we are or what our life is all about. We may even wonder if we are going crazy. It can be a place and time of separation, loneliness, and isolation. This is what has happened to Luke’s Gerasene Demoniac . He cannot put his life back together. It is too much. Whatever it might be for him or for each of us, Jesus comes to the Legion of our lives.

Jesus comes to us with his presence —in his presence there is inner clarity, focus, knowing, and understanding. He is the presence of unity, wholeness, and integration. He is the image of who we are and who we can become. He is the one who is peace himself. He calms the storm. Walks across rough waters. Reaches across the abyss. Listens in the darkness. Teaches. Guides. Sends the demons away. He is and has the life we need. Unafraid of death or the tombs in which we live our lives, Jesus is not distracted by our craziness. He is not repulsed by anything we have done. He is not daunted by our chains and shackles.

When the Gerasene Demoniac 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?’” Within that question is recognition and nonrecognition. Something within the man knows that there is hope in Jesus. Something within him intuitively knows that his power can bring about wholeness, completeness and revive the soul. Deep speaks to deep. We can only recognize that which we already know, that which at some level is already a part of us. The power of Jesus is a revealing power, he reveals to us, the divine that is already within us. He brings it forth—from us. He restores. He restores that which was already created and gifted to us.

In Luke’s story, despite the presence of Legion, the true image within this man was never completely lost or destroyed. It may have been taken over, covered up, forgotten, denied, or ignored but it was never absent. This is as true for us as it is for the Gerasene Demoniac. Jesus stands before us as the mirror, the image, the truth-teller of who we really are. He gives us back ourselves. He reveals the original beauty of our creation. He stands before us with a truth that challenges us at the places in our lives that are fragmented and distorted, in the ways in which we are not true to ourselves, and in the times when our identity has been lost and shattered. Legion can never be our final reality or ultimate identity. Our final reality and identity can be seen in Jesus. This is the truth that clothed this man, and returned him to himself.

Life is anything but boring. Yes, we know what it is like to be Legion. We can tell that story. But there is a counter story. It is the story of our how our lives can be put back together, The Gerasene Demoniac is not the only one with a story. We each come to Jesus with the same question, and he offers the same healing and hope. AMEN.