

**“Legion”**  
**Luke 8:26-39**

**Sermon on June 19, 2022**  
**Rev. Kim Vidal**

Prayer: Dear God, when we encounter difficult and challenging stories of our faith, help us to understand with an open mind and move us to apply our faith to action. Amen.

He calls himself Legion. But that is not his real name. He has no permanent address and lives in a tomb. He makes strange, shrieking sounds. He was naked, bruised and wounded through self-harm. His uncontrollable rages have brought the people to drastic measures. They have shackled and chained him among the dead, in the town cemetery, where his roaring voice will not bother the living. No one really paid attention to healing him and making him well until that day when he encountered Jesus.

Jesus and his disciples were crossing over the Sea of Galilee to Gerasa – a land of the Gentiles - a small town away from their Jewish neighbours, where most people made their living by herding pigs. When Jesus gets there, he’s confronted immediately by this madman. He fell down before Jesus and shouted at the top of his lungs: *“What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I beg you, do not torment me.”* Unafraid of deaths or tombs, undistracted by the man’s insanity, Jesus was not there to torment him. Jesus was there to heal and unbind Legion.

Luke has a way of engaging us with descriptive words full of symbolic meanings. Historically speaking, the term Legion was a military unit of the Roman Army with 6000 soldiers. Luke uses this term to denote that the unclean spirit that possessed this poor man is not just one but a host of them. A myriad of demons torments his mind, body and soul. Mike Marsh explains that when this man calls himself Legion, he is actually saying, *“I am fragmented and fractured. My life is broken into 6000 pieces.”*

*Legion’s* story is tragic. He was a man who had lost himself. Luke did not tell us the root cause of his insanity. He could have been someone known to his neighbours, perhaps even an important member of his community. But now he lives alone, naked, living in tombs and clearly one who is an outcast from public life. He has nothing- no home, no clothes, no name, no

community. When he opens his mouth, only the shrieks of the demons come out. He is shattered into pieces of his former humanity. The unclean spirits that possessed *Legion* cause him self-destructive behavior and separation from normal living. He has been completely labelled by what ails him, by what robs him of joy and health, by what bounds him as fully human, by all those things that keep him from experiencing life in its abundance.

But that's not the only reason why the name Legion was used by Luke. You see, Gerasa, the setting of this story, was known as the location of a Jewish revolt in 67 CE where the Roman Legion under general, Lucius Annius, brutally slaughtered 1,000 rebels who were captured in Gerasa and then destroyed it and its surrounding villages. Luke, naming this madman *Legion*, strongly suggests that the demons occupying the madman's body were linked with acts of Roman oppression and terrorism. The horrific outcome of colonization.

Regardless of what modern terms we use to call this man – insane, crazy, mentally-ill, schizophrenic - what we know for sure is that the man's condition strips him of sanity, dignity, self-worth and community. Who of us does not know what that is like? There are times when we lose our bearings in life and no longer know who we are or what our life is all about. If “demons” as those forces which have captured us and prevented us from becoming what God intends us to be, then we are as surrounded and possessed by -- as many demons as those whom Jesus encountered in this story.

The demons may take the form of any personal, social, political, cultural or religious structures that bind us, shackle us and oppress us in many ways. Sometimes we tend to define ourselves in terms of our deficiencies and illnesses, our disappointments and failures, and there are tons of them if we name them one by one. Add to that the fact that people tormented by anxiety, depression, addiction, mental illness and unjust suffering are everywhere. And every time we identify with these things, if we allow these things to possess us, they somehow rob us of the abundant life God hopes that we experience and share. They take away from us the true meaning of joy and courage to find real beauty in life. And sometimes relationships are put aside and then we wake up one day to find life empty and meaningless – so we wander around in our own tombs, away from those we love and care for. Each of us could tell about a time

when our life was shattered and left in thousands of pieces that we just could not put back together. Dreams and hopes. Faith and beliefs. Relationships and financial burdens. We know what it is like to lose our self, our life, our name and identity. We know what it is like to be Legion.

Here's the main focus of this passage. Jesus sent the host of the unclean spirits to drive a herd of pigs mad. Apologies to animal rights activists and those of us who love their bacon - but by Jewish law, the pig is an unclean animal. First century writers like Luke designate unclean spirits to unclean animals and that, being destructive, would drive the animals to death – again a symbolic act of defeat for Rome. As we hear the hooves of the pigs running toward the sea, the message of this exorcism performed by Jesus is that even the power of Rome will ultimately be no match for the liberating power of God. This act, in Luke's memory, speaks of Jesus' power and authority to liberate the world and humanity not only from physical, mental and spiritual setbacks, but also from oppression and chaos.

When the Gerasenes, especially the pig herders, saw this healing miracle, they didn't like it at all. Jesus was messing with their livelihood. What they saw turned their world upside down. They found this once-insane man clothed and in his right mind, sitting at the feet of Jesus. He had been healed. He had been saved. But the townspeople didn't rejoice. They couldn't handle it. Better to live with the chaos they knew before than to deal with the transforming power of God that they didn't know and couldn't control. Sometimes we are like those townspeople too. Sometimes we prefer to stick with demons we know, rather than embrace freedoms and new ways that we don't know. In the words of Evan Gardner, "Sometimes the terror we know is more tolerable than the peace we can't imagine."

This story of Legion reminds me of the indigenous communities - how they were chained and shackled by the evils of colonialism that shattered them into pieces. We know about the horrors of residential schools – of how thousands of indigenous children were taken forcibly from their homes, families and communities. They were stripped of their culture, language, spirituality, family roots and identity. Fathers and mothers lose their capacity to nurture their children, to pass down their values and ways of life. The impact: an overwhelming failure that left the

indigenous communities in anger, deep wounds, displacement, shame, and separation of families that were passed on from one generation to the next. The demons of racism and colonialism put upon the indigenous communities resulted in family dysfunction, cultural uprootedness, not to mention, increased rates of chronic and infectious diseases, mental illnesses, substance abuse and suicidal behaviours, particularly among young people. And add to that the plight of the families of the missing aboriginal women.

As followers of Jesus, we are asked to be agents of healing - to unbind the legion that chains and shackles others because of race, colour, creed, sexual orientation, or disability. To do this, we need to change the way we treat others. When we look at an indigenous person or a Muslim or a person with mental illness, and treat him or her like a brother or a sister, that is a starting point. We can never move past our prejudices and biases until we see ourselves in the “other”, particularly those who are different from us. May we listen attentively to their stories and their struggles, to acknowledge their past, to appreciate the beauty of their culture and spirituality and to stand with them as they advocate for the government to live out its responsibility. May we plant seeds of respect, honour and compassion and pray that God’s grace will bless those seeds until they grow and blossom into the reality of truth and reconciliation.

Jesus unbinds Legion. He is now changed. Luke uses the Greek word *sozo*, which can be translated as “saved,” “delivered,” or “made whole.” He is no longer naked but clothed, healed from being possessed and now in his right mind. In his gratitude for his new life, the healed man wants to follow Jesus but Jesus tells him: “Return to your home and declare how much God has done for you.” That leads into the important last verse of the story: “He went away, proclaiming throughout the city how much Jesus had done for him.” He has not only become a follower of Jesus, but a “proclaimer” as well. Jesus gives the man his humanity and identity again.

“Return to your home and declare how much God has done for you.” Here’s where the story becomes our story. We know what it is like to be Legion. It is the story of how our life was put back together, healed and transformed by God’s love. We were given back ourselves, our

dignity, our identity, our humanity. It's the story Jesus wants us to tell. We need others to hear it. Be a healer. You have an important story to tell. Thanks be to God. Amen.

Sources:

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