

“What Do You Want with Me, Jesus?”

Hosea 11:1-4; Luke 8:26-33, 35

July 28, 2019

I used to meet weekly with a wonderful group of clergy when I served churches in the area of Cleveland, Ohio. We studied the lectionary readings for the week ahead as an exercise in sermon preparation. Regardless of the scripture, the question we always asked was: “How will understanding this story help us grow into the person, or church, God is calling us to be?”

Today’s reading is a more of a stretch from the usual healings we hear about from Jesus. I believe its strangeness is what drew me to Debie Thomas’ commentary in *Journey with Jesus*. Thomas is the Director of Youth and Children’s Ministries at St. Mark’s Episcopal in Palo Alto, CA. She offers a graphic parallel, and then raises pertinent questions.

He haunts the places of the dead. Every night, the townspeople hear him, shrieking among the tombs. When they’re quick enough, they catch him, wrap his wrists and ankles in chains, and haul his naked body - securely shackled - back to town. But there’s no containing the crazy; he escapes each time. Trailing broken chains behind him, he wanders the wilds, tearing at his skin until it bleeds, trading one ind of pain for another. If he has a name, no one knows it. If he has a history, no one remembers it. If he has a soul worth saving inside his living corpse, no sees it. No one looks.

Until Jesus does...

Then Thomas reflects:

“I worry that focusing on the stranger parts of the story prevents us from seeing how it can be our story, a story of our here and now. So indulge me, please, as I sidestep the tough stuff, and share why I’m haunted (in good and necessary ways) by the healing of the Gerasene demoniac. Why his encounter with Jesus makes me gasp and squirm, smile and cry, linger and recoil, repent and return.”

I think the story is our story because it begins precisely where we ourselves need to begin, and that is with a question. “What is your name?” Jesus asks when he first encounters the possessed man by the lake. Remember, the man approaches Jesus, NOT to ask for help, but to push Jesus away. Maybe to **try** to scare Jesus away. In all likelihood, his approach is violent and terrifying. But Jesus asks for a name, anyway, and by doing so, he begins to recall the broken man to himself. To his humanity, to his beginnings. To his unique and precious identity as a child beloved of God.

What is your name? Has there ever been a more loving, searching question? What would happen if you allowed Jesus to ask it of you? What would happen if you asked it of others? Who are you? Who are you, really? Beneath the labels and the diagnoses, the pretense and the piety, the fear and the shame? Who are you when no one in this world is looking? What name do you yearn to be called in the lonely stretches of the night? Who were you before you lost yourself? Before something vital in you died? Do you even remember?

I remember a story from my friend Kim, who is a chaplain at a Retirement Community. It was from a Sunday afternoon worship service, when she invited the residents to share their prayer concerns. There was one woman in the residents who had gathered who seemed especially distressed. She was frantically waving her arms and moaning loudly. Her name was Angela, and Kim had visited her often. Angela was known by all to not have spoken anything articulate for a long, long time, maybe even years. She simply could not communicate with any spoken words.

Some other friends and staff members were soon able to calm her down, and Kim prayed. She included Angela. As the people were leaving and Kim was shaking their hands, Angela was being rolled by in her wheel chair. She clutched Kim's hand and pulled her down to her side. In perfect diction she said: "Thank you for praying for me by my name."

There was a powerful piece in one of my readings of *The Daily Plough* this week that seems very relevant to this passage. It's from the writings of Heinrich Arnold, in *Freedom from Sinful Thoughts*, offered at the time of the Reformation. *The image of a sweet, gentle Savior, like the thought of an all-loving God, is wonderful, but it is only a small part of the picture. It insulates us from the real power of his touch. Christ comforts and hears, saves and forgives, we know that. But we must not forget that he judges, too. If we truly love him, we will love everything in him; not only his compassion and mercy, but his sharpness, too. It is his sharpness that prunes and heals.*

When the devil's power is broken in any soul - that soul recovers itself, and returns into a right frame, which supposes that those whom Satan gets possession of are put out of the possession of themselves: *The man out of whom the devils were departed sat at the feet of Jesus, v. 35.* While he was under the devil's power, he was ready to *fly in the face* of Jesus; but now he *sits at his feet*, which is a sign that he is come to his *right mind*. If God has possession of us, the Lord preserves to us the rule and enjoyment of ourselves; but, if Satan has possession of us, we are robbed of both. Let evil power therefore in our souls be overturned, and let *us* come to right our hearts, and let us give them to Christ Jesus; for we are never more our own than when we are his.

If we expand the definition of "possession" to include everything that conspires to keep us dead when God wants us alive, then the story of the Gerasene demoniac is not an ancient oddity. It is the air we breathe. It is the pandemic of our time.

This story tells us exactly where salvation lies, and it does so without hesitation or apology. When the demoniac sees Jesus, he falls down before him. When the townspeople come running to see what's going on, they find the man "sitting at the feet of Jesus, clothed and in his right mind." Salvation, in other words, lies at the feet of Jesus. It lies in surrendering to the one who alone has the power to cast out the horrors which torment us. This is not because Jesus is arrogant or forceful in his call to obedience. It's because evil in all of its incarnations finds him terrifying. It's because there is no death-dealing power in this universe that can withstand the saving, healing, resurrecting power of Jesus. It's because even the most destructive demons we can conjure up beg for mercy when he comes to town.

The story ends with Jesus commissioning the healed man to stay where he is and serve as the first missionary to his townspeople — the same townspeople who feared, shunned, trapped, and shackled him for years. Isn't this just like Jesus? To choose the very people we consider the most unholy, the most unredeemable, the most repulsive and unworthy — and commission them to teach us the Gospel?

What is your name, and who is God calling you, and this great church of Cook's Memorial Presbyterian, to be?