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“Legion”

Isaiah 65:1-9 Psalm 22:19-28 Luke 8:26-39 Galatians 3:23-29

This week our Confirmation Class begins to study the life of Martin Luther. Luther, believed in demons but he believed in God more. In that great Hymn "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God" he writes:

And though this world, with devils filled, should threaten to undo us  
 We will not fear, for God hath willed His truth to triumph through us:  
 The Prince of Darkness grim, we tremble not for him;  
 His rage we can endure, for lo, his doom is sure. One little word shall fell him.

That hymn, first published in 1529, has been called "the greatest hymn of the greatest man of the greatest period of German history." It has also been dubbed the "Battle Hymn of the Reformation" and with good reason. The Reformation touched off one of the most influential movements in world history. But before this famous Battle Hymn could be written Luther had to battle his personal demons and exorcize them from his own life. Luther felt utterly worthless and incapable of carrying the burdens of priesthood. On occasion Luther even flogged himself in an attempt to keep himself from sin.

He was often, he felt, pursued and tormented by Satan and his cohorts. Until one day, while reading Paul's letter to the Romans, he suddenly understood the meaning of God's grace and how it is appropriated by faith. In that moment he came to understand that he was justified before God through faith and not by his works.

You might say that after this experience, like the man Jesus encountered in our gospel lesson today who was possessed by Legion, Luther was no longer possessed by his demons, he was sitting upright, dressed, and in his right mind. 1

In our scientific world some feel that demons are part of the mythical past. But in spite of all our progress there are still diabolical forces at work. It doesn't take any more than a glance at the newspaper or the checking out the evening news broadcast to see that evil is still wreaking havoc in the lives of people.

There is no question that our modern ears have trouble hearing this story. We would understand it better if the poor man in the graveyard were simply described as mentally ill. We are not comfortable in either giving credit or blame for the events of our lives to unseen beings. We would rather understand the story as one more example of Jesus' deep compassion for hurting individuals and an affirmation of his marvelous power to heal even when our afflictions are "legion." But that would misunderstand the story. This one is about MORE than healing; this one is about confronting evil.

From Mary Shelly's "Frankenstein" to The Nightmare on Elm Street's "Freddy;" from Friday the Thirteenth's "Jason" to Chucky from Child's Play 1, 2 and 3, Bride of Chucky, Seed of Chucky Curse of Chucky and Cult of Chucky we seem hell-bent on creating

monsters. Next year we are promised that Chucky will become a TV series. Why are we constantly on the lookout for bigger, scarier “bumps in the night?” Why do we keep making up monsters that are so elaborate and extraordinary, so super-powered and immortal?

Maybe we need our monsters to be as unlike ourselves as possible so that we can ignore the presence of the real monsters that possess us . . . from the inside out.

This man from the tombs is a classic “monster.” He is nothing like the “normal” people in his community. He runs around naked. He is “out of his mind.” He is strong enough to break out of any chains and shackles. He had escaped from every prison that his neighbors had built to contain him. He spent his life ranting and raving among the tombs, a man living with the dead—an undead among the dead.

This is an eerie, grim, frightening situation. Jesus and His disciples have just come through a storm on the Sea of Galilee. It is nighttime and having survived that frightening storm they are thrilled to now set foot on solid ground. But, as they get out of the boat, they encounter a different kind of storm... They hear strange sounds coming from the tombs... shrieks, growls, screams, moans, the rattling of chains. Then, suddenly, a horrifying sight. A madman, bruised, dirty, bloody and battered with pieces of chains dangling from his arms and ankles, comes running and screaming directly toward them!

Yet he is NOT a monster. He is just a man. Once Jesus calls out the unclean spirits from him, the man is restored physically and spiritually to his full humanity. This is someone who was never “a monster.”

The demons recognized Jesus as the Son of the Most High God. The demons in "Legion" beg Jesus not to order them back to the abyss. This Jesus who stills the storm, walks over the deep, raises the dead, heals the sick, also comes to liberate the "possessed." Jesus comes, in our text, and in our lives, to bring liberation from sin, death, and the power of evil.

This man tormented by legion has no purpose or meaning in his deranged life. God's liberating power calls him from the abyss and sets him free in a most unusual manner.

A herd of swine is near. According to Jewish teachings and tradition pigs were considered unclean. Gerasene was an area where the Gentiles lived and the swine were most likely raised to feed the Roman occupying troops who had no qualms about eating pork chops or ham or.... Bacon. Years ago I wrote a song that tried to include all the Bible jokes I had ever heard. In it I describe this event as the first case of deviled ham.

When Jesus banished the evil spirits from this man he filled the man with a new identity and a new mission. Having been healed by Jesus the man joyfully proclaims “how much Jesus had done for him” to all his neighbors, even “throughout the city.” Now this is an

unlikely evangelist, Long before Saul a Jewish man became Paul on the Damascus Road, to become an apostle to the Gentiles Jesus sent this man from the tombs to proclaim the good news to the Gentiles. Because the healed man felt God's power and presence so fully in the person of Jesus, he became a new person in Christ.

Should someone think "demon possession" is a relic of a pre-scientific age when mental and physical illnesses were attributed to evil spirits the fact is we live in a culture that suffers from a "legion" of possessing spirits, as toxic and traumatic as those that came raging forth from this man who called himself Legion. We may not have a Legion tormenting us, but evil it still on the move. It may come in a bottle, or at a card table or at a food table. It may come at us online.

What and how are dark powers manifested today? Surely they are both personal and collective. They come to us as individuals, and they come to us through the structures, processes, and policies of institutions and government as well as society as a whole.

Who can explain away the horrors of darkness? We cringe at the thought of a serial killer like Ted Bundy, David Berkowitz, or Jeffrey Dimmer. We recoil at the almost weekly reports of mass shootings. We abhor the holocaust; famine in Africa; sexist, racial, and ethnic hatred; children working in sweat factories, child prostitution, sexual abuse, abuse by cults; preemptive war by our leaders; global warming to the threat of destruction of our only home planet earth.

We struggle with personal evils within. Jesus was not deterred by the screaming man from the tombs. Jesus launched a direct, frontal assault on the dark and evil power that had taken control of "Legion." "What is your name?"

Our clue is to "name the offender." We need to name alcohol and substance abuse. It's not just "a few too many!" We need to name lying. It's not just "shading the truth." White lies are still lies. We need to call it cheating. It's not "everybody's doing it." We need to name it as stealing. It's not "one of the benefits of working here." Like Jesus we must by the grace of God look evil in the face and call it for what it is.

This is what happened to Bob. His addiction was to alcohol. Bob was controlled and consumed by the addiction. It colored everything he did, said, or thought. He continued on the spiral down until one day he named it. He was able to say in therapy, "My name is Bob. I am an alcoholic." Recovery will take the rest of his lifetime and he knows it.

In our century addictions are legion. Addicts are always speaking of being possessed by the need for their chemical demons. Heroin, cocaine, crack, meth, alcohol, nicotine are "legion" in the battle for human spirits. Addictions aren't limited to chemicals. There are some that are addicted to gambling, to pornography, to hoarding and to craving attention. But like the man from the tombs ... there is Hope.

Mental Illnesses are legion. Mental illness is still just as powerful and divisive as ever. In addition to the effects of the illness itself its victims are treated as pariahs to be

shunned and isolated like the man from the tombs that Jesus encountered. But like the man from the tombs there is Peace.

Power is legion. The lust for power not only affects individuals, people who must have power to prove their worth, whether it be the power of money or political influence or terror, but it also affects nations. Nations seek to control and maintain without a sense for the need of justice and mercy. When that power rises to a crescendo, we see the results in a Hitler or Stalin or Mussolini, or Pol Pot, or Assad or the KKK, or ISIS or any radical extremists of any stripe that thrive on fear to gain power over others.

This week folks in Texas observed Juneteenth. On June 19, 154 years ago, those who had been enslaved who lived in Texas found out that they were indeed free...two years after the fact. But like the man from the tombs there is Freedom.

Greed is legion threatening to make us slaves of want. We are possessed by our possessions. The desire to have and to hoard is something that many in our society prize and encourage. Things can become often more important than people, more important than faith. But like the man from the tombs there is Grace

Fear is legion. Fear drove the townspeople to put away the madman living among the tombs from their community. But those powers can be defeated by the power that Jesus exercised as he freed the man tortured by Legion. We must not give in to fear." I John 4:18 says "there is no fear in love. Perfect love casts out fear." Like the man from the tombs there is Courage.

Hate is legion. Three years ago a man rose from a worship service at Mother Emmanuel AME Church in S. Carolina and killed 9 worshippers. One man took the lives of 49 others and wounding 53 others in a matter of minutes. This week Emmanuel, a movie about that event and the response to it had a special screening is selected theaters. Even in the face of such hatred, like the man from the tombs there is Love.

As Martin Luther discovered though, Jesus is greater than any and all evil.

Even though this world, with devils filled, should *threaten to undo us*  
*We will not fear, for God hath willed His truth to triumph through us:*  
*The Prince of Darkness grim, we tremble not for him;*  
*His rage we can endure, for lo, his doom is sure. One little word shall fell him.*

*What is that little word? Hope, Peace, Freedom, Grace, Courage, Love. and the little word that Luther discovered in Romans—Grace. Those little words are more than a match for ... legion.*

*And the people said, "Amen."*