

## “RELEASED, RESTORED, RETURNED”

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*Scripture:* Luke 8:26-39

<sup>26</sup>Then they arrived at the country of the Gerasenes, which is opposite Galilee. <sup>27</sup>As [Jesus] 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. <sup>28</sup>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”— <sup>29</sup>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.) <sup>30</sup>Jesus then asked him, “What is your name?” He said, “Legion”; for many demons had entered him. <sup>31</sup>They begged him not to order them to go back into the abyss. <sup>32</sup>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. <sup>33</sup>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. <sup>34</sup>When the swineherds saw what had happened, they ran off and told it in the city and in the country. <sup>35</sup>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. <sup>36</sup>Those who had seen it told them how the one who had been possessed by demons had been healed. <sup>37</sup>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. <sup>38</sup>The man from whom the demons had gone begged that he might be with him; but Jesus sent him away, saying, <sup>39</sup>“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.

What a powerful and poignant story Luke tells us of Jesus in Gentile territory of the Geresenes – beyond his Jewish boundaries bringing God’s liberating, healing gift to a man who was hardly a man at all in the eyes of his community. Once again, Jesus steps out of the little comfort zone of his religious community to show that wherever there is human brokenness and sickness, God’s grace is available; Jesus’ comfort zone is no smaller than the whole human community.

It is poignant because of the total captivity of the man to powers beyond his control and the reaction of the townspeople to this sad, self-destructive, possessed fellow citizen. Try to imagine the heart-wrenching scenario that was played out over and over again in that Gerasene town. The man lived not in a house but in a tomb out on the margins of town...naked, exposed...already dead in his own eyes as well as his community’s eyes, chained and under guard because, understandably, the people feared him and warned their children not to go near. When the demons completely took him over, they would drive him wild; he’d break the chains and head for the wilderness. The town would round up a search party to find him and chain him back up in the tombs because he was too scary to allow to roam free. You can imagine what people said about him and what they told their children about this madman in their midst.

When Jesus asks the man his name, he replies “Legion.” How poignant *that* is! There are so many demons, so many destructive forces, so many false identities pulling at him and overwhelming him and controlling his thoughts and actions, that he doesn’t know, can’t even state his true name. He is captive in an extreme degree to what many of God’s children

experience in less dramatic but no less consequential ways: some other power than our Creator, our Heavenly Parent, has told us who we are, defined us. What's your name? "I'm Stupid – the other kids at school told me so." "I'm Weird – nobody wants me in their group." "My name is Failure – my father's expectations have made that clear." "I'm Invisible – everybody seems to look right through as if I'm not even there." "Call me Lightweight – nobody hears or cares what I'm trying to say." "Loser – that's who my peers say I am." "I'm Legion – there are just so many powerful forces tugging and pulling and controlling my life...I can't even begin to name them." So easily we can let ourselves be defined by the names others impose upon us...people or demons. This man is a non-person with no name of his own...too captive to the controlling powers to realize that his true name is Child of God, Beloved One.

Until...Jesus arrives, crossing the border beyond which and with which most believed God had little to do. And this is the **power** within this poignant story. By setting him free from these demons, these forces that have a tight grip upon him, Jesus gives him back his name...gives him a future...gives him a new and true identity. He is restored: from "Legion" to "Person of Immeasurable Worth." He is restored from life at the margins of the community as a scary, chained-up person, to return to the town of his people, and resume life in the web of human community. Yes, some property was destroyed in the process; that herd of swine driven and drowned in the lake was likely someone's property and perhaps a means of income; but for Jesus there's no question as to how the scales tip. "Jesus Means Freedom" – the title of a book I read early in my ministry and has been a lasting recollection; the gospel is all about releasing us from those false identities that may try to tell us who we are, and freeing us to be God's own above all others.

Having seen this liberating power in the life of one who had been a non-person, now a man with a name, an identity, a life, a future – the community can respond in either *faith* or in *fear*; what'll it be? *In faith?*...recognizing and celebrating and joining that power that can release us from whatever our captivity, available to all, not just in such extreme cases as this demoniac. Or – the way they choose – *in fear*. A powerful force of healing has upset the way of life they had become accustomed to; and while it was a tumultuous, exasperating way of life – constantly hunting the madman down and re-chaining him in the tombs, it was the life they were used to that Jesus has now changed forever. Sometimes we may prefer living with our accustomed brokenness in ourselves and our community, than adapt to the new and less predictable way of wholeness and healing. There are people who would rather nurse an infirmity than deal with the responsibility of being healed; not everyone desires to be well...and not every community. So this town would have preferred the broken but familiar scenario rather than receive back a man made whole, a person once again, a son of the community. The healing, the exorcising strikes fear, and rather than embrace Jesus' healing gift for the whole community with all its little and large broken places – they ask Jesus to leave.

The restored man, out of gratitude and overwhelming joy for his liberation and healing, asks to go with Jesus...to be part of this movement of setting captives free and making whole the broken. Our healing moves us to discipleship and to mission; if we know we've been restored to our true self and freed of all the false names and identities, we want to share in this power and be agents of that healing for others. Jesus affirms that desire but refocuses the arena: Go back to your home, your community, the people who feared you and chained you – and proclaim this message of healing grace...what God has done for you. "So he went away,

proclaiming throughout the city how much Jesus had done for him.” The work of Jesus *is* the work of God in our human tapestry. Maybe the toughest mission field is the hometown...the folks that knew us when. Even Jesus, according to Matthew, could not do deeds of power in his hometown.<sup>i</sup> The man was returned to wholeness...and returned to his community to be a strong witness.

Now I want to bring this sermon home to us. We can be and indeed are called to be part of that proclamation and agents of healing and restoration of God’s forgotten, demon-possessed, chained –up children. In 40+ years of ministry, I have never exorcised a demon...as far as I know...though I have had prayers with people who thought that a dark or evil spirit was lurking in their lives, or inhabiting a house or a particular room. But as disciples we **are** called to be ministers of healing, working in concert with God’s liberating power. Luke has Jesus commissioning his disciples, telling them to “cure the sick”; and Matthew goes even further in having Jesus charge disciples: “Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons.”<sup>ii</sup>

I believe we **can** be agencies of such things – not by our own power or some kind of stunning magic – but by aligning our lives and shaping our discipleship to affirm and enable the healing power which is God’s grace...Christ’s touch...let it find a home in our life and in the communities in which we live and work and play. We can be living witnesses that our true identity is rooted not in who anyone says we are but only by virtue of God’s naming us as his own, which we proclaim first of all in baptism. So...with what attitude, with what message do we approach those who cry out that their name is Legion...or Stupid, or Loser-in-Love, or Nobody, or Useless? How can we encourage (en-courage= “pour courage into”) our communities – our neighborhood, our church, our social or business circles – to respond to God’s healing, liberating movement in *faith* rather than in *fear*. How can we open doors rather than joining the group that is bolting and nailing them shut out of fear? I believe there are countless ways we can be present with Jesus as agents of restoration, as he casts out the demons that would hold us and our neighbors imprisoned. And in all likelihood, this very day will not end without God giving us such an opportunity to stand up for faith rather than acquiesce in fear. I believe it. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Matthew 13:53-58

<sup>ii</sup> Luke 9:1 and 10:9; Matthew 10:8