

### Naming Our Demons

So, what do you think? Are demons real? Maybe our answer depends on what we mean by the word “demon.” Often it’s used as a synonym for an “evil spirit,” a servant of Satan, AKA the Devil. Which would change our question to “Are evil spirits real?”

The Jews of first-century Palestine certainly thought so, as well as the cultures and religions of surrounding countries. The Jewish belief in demons carried over from their Hebrew scripture, in which evil spirits were ultimately under the authority of God. But by the first century such spirits or demons had become somehow more personal, more pervasive, and, if anything, more evil.

The word “demon” appears 70 times in the New Testament. Sixty-one of those are in the four Gospels. In John, where the word demon appears just seven times, it’s always Jesus who is being accused of “having a demon.” But in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, we find story after story of Jesus confronting demons who are possessing other people. Like this morning’s story from the Gospel of Luke.

Luke tells us that the story takes place in the country of the Gerasenes, across the Sea of Galilee from, well, Galilee. Which is significant. Because the country of the Gerasenes was Gentile country. Complete with hillsides full of “unclean” pigs, and the equally unclean hired hands who watch over them, known in this story as “swineherds.”

Jesus hadn’t yet spent a lot of time in Gentile country. But we get the sense that he knew what he was doing. Or rather, he knew both who and what he would find there on the opposite shore. Namely, the man with the demons. Making us shake our heads in wonder; why would Jesus care about a Gentile man with demons? What all was he up to?

The man definitely appeared to be possessed, or out of his mind, or both. Luke spares no details about his affliction. For a long time already he had worn no clothes, going around naked. He did not live in a house like “normal” people do, but lived among the tombs of the dead. He was kept under guard and bound with chains and shackles, but such was his astonishing, superhuman strength that he easily broke these bonds and fled into the wilds.

Luke says that when Jesus stepped out of the boat and onto dry land, the man came to meet him. In fact, he fell down in front of him, and Luke says he shouted “at the top of his voice,” which we can imagine would have been pretty loud. (Please excuse me, but here goes:) “What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I beg you, do not torment me!”

Clearly the man—or rather, the demon inside him—knew who Jesus was. Not just a traveling Jewish preacher from Nazareth in Galilee. Not just a healer, or miracle worker. But the “Son of the Most High God.” No Jew had yet recognized Jesus for who he really was, as this Gentile man just had. And it was either the man or the demon inside him who knew about Jesus’ powers. Or make that, “Power” (capital P).

It’s quite ironic that he begged Jesus not to torment him. Considering the dramatic extent to which the demon had been tormenting the man. Yet in this moment, he clearly knew that he was no match for Jesus.

It is at this point that Jesus asked the demon for his name. And the response he receives is clearly meant to astonish Luke’s readers, including us. “Legion.” That’s more than just a

name, you see. It's a number. It's an army. (A Roman "legion" was composed of anywhere from five to six thousand men.) Where Luke had to this point didn't seem to have made up his mind whether the man had a "demon" (singular) or "demons" (plural), it now becomes quite clear. No wonder the man had superhuman strength! He had an entire legion of demons inside of him! An "army of Satan," you might say.

But now this army had come face to face with Jesus, Son of the Most High God, and they began literally seizing in fear. "Do not send us back into the abyss," they cried. The abyss was the underworld, or netherworld, where even demons are imprisoned. "Send us into the swine, let us enter the swine!" And we have to wonder: did they know what would happen next? That the pigs would not just go mad and scatter around the countryside, but would rush headlong into the lake, where both the pigs and the demons would drown? Did they know that water was anathema to their kind? (You can look that up: Luke 11:24.)

When the people from the nearby city came to see what all the commotion was, they found the man, whom they had only known as possessed and crazed, now fully clothed, "sitting at the feet of Jesus," the position of an eager new student and disciple, miraculously restored to his right, God-given mind. In other words, healed.

Let's ask ourselves again: are demons real? Our answer will probably still depend on what exactly we mean by the word "demon." Let me tell you how my "modern" dictionary defines it. "Demon; 1a – an evil spirit; 1b, a source or agent of evil, harm, distress, or ruin."

While the first definition was no surprise, the second one definitely broadens the meaning of the term. By that definition I have to confess that I have at least two demons. Their names are "depression," and "anxiety." Truly they are horrible, evil demons! And I think we all know how common they are in our society.

One of the commentaries I read said that in Jesus' time, learning the name of a demon gave an exorcist more power to cast it out. My exorcists are my doctors, my therapists, and my medications. My demons have not yet been completely cast out. But they are bound and shackled. For which I thank not just my exorcists, but my God!

What are your demons? What "sources or agents of evil, harm, distress, or ruin" torment you? They are real, and they are indeed "legion." Mental illnesses of all kinds. Physical illnesses of all kinds. Addictions of all kinds. Brokenness of all kinds. Fear (of all kinds). Anger, with its many causes and manifestations. Self-doubt. Self-centeredness. Self-anything.

I could keep going. There are many, many demons alive in our world. What are yours? What are their names? Naming them gives us and those who love and care for us the power to identify them. And it gives Jesus, Son of the Most High God, the power to cast them out entirely. To banish them forever from our lives. Yes, even us despised, unclean Gentiles. You see, Jesus doesn't care about such labels.

The man wanted to go with Jesus. Jesus told him to return at long last to his home. To stay with his own people. Because they needed to hear his witness about the power of Jesus, Son of the Most High God."

For their part, it's interesting that they asked Jesus to leave them, for as Luke says, they were seized with great fear. Which truly is one of the most powerful and pervasive of demons in our world. And we have to wonder, what exactly were they afraid of? Change, maybe? The loss of their status quo? Of what had actually become their "normal?" Maybe even the loss of their livelihood (like the swine herds who lost their pigs)? Or were they afraid that Jesus might end up naming demons in all of them?

Today, if you are comfortable doing so, I invite you to name your own demons. Or, alternatively, name some demons that are affecting others you know and love. Write them down on the pieces of paper that were in this morning's bulletin (you can use the little pencils that are in the holder on the back of the pew in front of you). You needn't write your own name, just the name of the demon or demons. You'll have time to do this during the Postlude. And when you're done writing, I invite you (again, only if you are comfortable doing so) to bring them forward and place them in this bowl. They will then be compiled into a single list, which will be shared with members of the Care Committee and the Prayer Group, that they may pray over them (since that is the ministry to which they have been called). If you have any questions or concerns after the service or during the days to come, I also invite you to come and share them with your Care person or with me personally (or send me an email, or text, or any mode of communication you want).

Let me be clear: I myself am no healer. But I do have my own experience with some demons. And, I am here to bear witness to the one who is truly the Son of the Most High God, and the "Healer of Our Every Ill."

Let's sing our hymn of response together.

[At conclusion of the hymn.]

While Shirley plays the postlude, I invite you to name and write down either your demons, or of those you love and care for. And then bring them forward and place them in the bowl, as a way of giving them over to God. And then, may you go in peace.