

# What is Your Name?

## *Luke 8:26-39*

When Jesus stepped out of the boat "opposite Galilee," he stepped into a life-and-death drama. A Gerasene man ran to meet him. Asked for his name, the man replied that he had none; or, more accurately, he said that his name was "Legion," that is, "a multitude." Oppressed by too many demons to count, he had lost himself in the disharmony of their voices and had ceased being a self, an individual, a person. Hence he spent his days raving alone in the wilderness, a danger to himself and others, separated from his community and even himself. His need was well documented as he was considered possessed by demons, so worn out and distressed that he wore no clothes and lived among the tombs, an outcast in his community, so feared that he was often bound by shackles and kept under guard. At first glance, this situation is a classic encounter between good and evil: the power of God vs. the grasp of the demons. Over the years, interpreters have been tempted to explain the demonic condition in contemporary terms, proving either that demons do indeed exist or that the man had a psychiatric condition better understood in our modern context.

Whatever the reason he said his name was Legion.

What is your name? His answer was Unclean!

What is your name? His answer was Demonic!

What is your name? His answer was Gentile!

What is your name? His answer was Scarcely human!

What is your name? His answer was Dweller in tombs!

What is your name? His answer was Dweller among the dead!

What is your name? His answer was Naked!

What is your name? His answer was Unpredictable!

What is your name? His answer was Violent!

What is your name? His answer was Alone!

What is your name? His answer was Outsider!

What is your name? His answer was Sufferer!

What is your name? His answer was Evil!

What is your name? His answer was Wreaked!

What is your name? His answer was Havoc maker!

We do not know how the Gerasene man fell into his pitiful state, but he is not unlike homeless people today, who wander the urban wastelands of bridge abutments and alleys. Many of them are mentally ill, unable to live a normal life with a job, family, home, or basic necessities. Homeless people are at much greater risk of being victimized by assault, rape, and murder, the demonic legions that plague our streets. The homeless are "unclean" and unwelcome in most communities, inhabiting situations from which few are able to return to ordinary life. Every city has its Gerasenes. The Gerasenes are our neighbors.

The cause of the man's affliction is undefined, but there is no doubt regarding its intensity and the influences upon him were many. His life was essentially out of his control. How many of us are similarly overwhelmed by the voices raging at us from inside and out, belittling our identity and driving us to places of extreme loneliness or despair? So it is for many of us, even among those of us who call Jesus Lord. The thought that we are in control of our lives, or even that we allow God to be in control, is often debunked by the realities around us. Vocational concerns, financial pressures, broken relationships, and even the day-to-day details of life itself vie for our attention and eat away at both time and resources, distracting from the most important priority, being in relationship with God. We

need to be aware of the barriers that stand between us and the fullness of life with God is essential if we are to receive the transforming power God offers.

Did you notice that the unclean spirit within the man was the first to recognize the deity of Jesus and the ultimate futility in resisting. The primary question is not, "who are you?" but rather, "what are you going to do with me?" Simply recognizing the presence of God is not the same as committing oneself to that presence. While we dare not casually banish our demons and expect them to be healed, we can restore to each other our names, our birthright as children of God. The names and claims that the voices of this world may shout at us do not have the last word. We can declare that God claims us as God's own beloved children.

### **David J. Lose**

Just as Jesus went to the Gerasene, we his followers today are called to step out of the boat on the "opposite" side. The mission of Jesus and therefore the mission of his followers is to take the healing and liberating love of God to broken and desolate regions, to those whose lives are bound by demonic forces they cannot control. Indeed the missional language of exorcism and healing has been a notable feature of baptismal vows since antiquity. Baptismal candidates and confirmands promise, among other things, to resist Satan and the spiritual forces of wickedness in whatever ways they present themselves. To be baptized is to commit to going to the opposite side with Jesus.

We also find at the Lord's table the commission to go to the opposite side with the good news of salvation. From ancient times, Christians have understood that to share in the Table of the Lord is to take into themselves the very power and mission of Christ. To participate in Communion is to say yes to God's missional call.

When the great fourteenth-century theologian Julian of Norwich saw the redemption of Christ juxtaposed against the devil's destructive power, she "laughed

greatly," for she saw that in the end the "fiend" would not prevail. Every wound and sorrow inflicted by wickedness would, in Christ, become a source of honor and glory as it was healed. Julian's vision is borne out in this story of salvation. All the former wounds of the Gerasene demoniac become catalysts of redemption as the healed man went among his people to tell them what Jesus has done. **Elaine A. Heath**

When we encounter the presence of God in the confusion of our lives, we are faced with a similar problem. While accepting the healing and salvation of Christ may seem logical from a point of view of faith, our human instincts sometimes drive us in different directions. Just as the man in this story seemed to have no will of his own but was led to and fro by the demons within, we often resist change and flee to the familiar, living a life that makes no sense from a perspective of faith. Only when the man fell before Jesus did he find any kind of hope. We find peace and transformation at the feet of our Savior, not in a shelter of a life directed by other influences.

Rather than recognizing and celebrating the God-given good fortune of their neighbor, the people of the surrounding countryside were struck with fear. How ironic that the demons accepted the authority of God in Jesus so much quicker than the Gerasenes! That they should fear the Son of God more than the unclean spirits that had harassed this man so intensely is a demonstration of the emotion that sometimes accompanies an encounter with the holy (see, e.g., [Luke 1:12](#); [1:30](#); [1:65](#); and [2:9](#)). Indeed there is some truth to the observation that we sometimes prefer the troubles we know to changes we do not know. There in front of them was the evidence of God's power, a gift given for their benefit. The conditions that had plagued the man for so long were gone, not simply driven away, but destroyed. As for the man, his life was visibly changed; he was no longer a victim, but a victor, transformed and given a new chance at life by this one that the demons had

called the "Son of the Most High God." Yet the people of the area asked Jesus to leave, willingly forfeiting any opportunity to further benefit from this amazing power that he brought into their midst.

This story demonstrates that no one is beyond the reach of Christ's redeeming, healing love and much about the love of God. Jesus liberated and healed the man. Salvation is holistic, bringing life to body, mind, spirit, and relationships. In a final demonstration of healing love, Jesus sent the nameless man home, where he became the first missionary to the Gentiles.

"Return to your home, and declare how much God has done for you" (v. 39). With those words, Jesus sent the man who was healed back to his own city, to serve as witness to all regarding what had transpired. On a personal level, he had been the recipient of life-changing grace, but as a rehabilitated member of the Gerasene community, and as one who had encountered the power of God intimately, he had an important story to tell. **Richard J. Shaffer Jr.**

So, what is your name? It is healed, whole, beloved child of God!

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