Hang on To That Name

A Meditation on Luke 8: 26 - 39

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What are you thinking about right now? Aside from what’s for lunch? Let me rephrase that. What are you thinking about in terms of the story – the bizarre story - we just read?

Are you thinking about:

* The man, homeless, friendless, bound in chains?
* Demon possession and exorcism?
* The pigs? (and all that wasted bacon?)

The images that this story conjures up are disturbing: a man so frantic and deranged that he can snap the chains that bind him, a crazed herd of pigs, and an entire village pulling up the welcome mat, and saying to Jesus, “Go away.”

The bizarre elements in this story – from the description of the man and his torment, to the stampede of pigs - pull our attention. They draw us away from the more subtle moments, the very elements that hold the truths we need. While transformation takes place when those demons are thrown into the pigs (much to the demise of the pigs), and transformation takes place when a once frantic, manic man can be *still*, transformation also takes place on an entirely different level when an individual is restored to community.

We should expect this of Jesus. It is one of his deepest desires: the restoration of the displaced, excluded individual. And these restored people become evangelists, over and over again because their joy cannot be contained. We see it with the Samaritan woman at the well. The village well was a place to gather, a place to socialize, an opportunity to step away from the chores and catch up on the news. Who was pregnant again, whose child was teething, whose teenager was causing headaches. But not for the unnamed Samaritan woman in the story from John’s gospel. She went alone to the well, and knowing she was alone, Jesus met her there. He knows her story of numerous husbands and of her current, less that desirable (for her) living arrangement. Instead of shame, he offers her truth and living water, and in response she brings salvation to her entire community. *She* is restored; *they* are reborn.

We witness a similar healing for the woman caught in adultery. Jesus finds the accused woman surrounded by those who wish to stone her. (No similar punishment for the man involved.) Instead of condemning her to death, Jesus begins to write in the sand. Many have wondered if he is writing the accusers’ sins in the sand as they prepare to carry out their form of justice. As he works his way around the group, each drops his stone as his sin is exposed before everyone. With no one left to stone her, Jesus encourages her to go, to be renewed, to be restored. Brought back from the threat of execution, she is restored to new life. And a community with the potential to be reborn.

I have preached before on Zacchaeus, arguing that the story might not be about his alleged crimes as a tax collector and his subsequent need for forgiveness. In fact, he may have been much maligned simply for being a Jew who was employed by the Roman Empire. We have no proof that Zacchaeus was a cheat, but we do hear a willingness on his part to redress any mistakes he may have made. He was, no doubt, excluded, ostracized by his community. Jesus invites himself to dinner at this tax collector’s home, a choice that horrifies the crowd, but testifies to the truth that Zacchaeus is one of God’s children. A child to be welcomed, not a brother to be shunned. A son restored to the family. A community whose assumptions have been challenged. A community with the potential to be reborn.

On the far side of the sea of Galilee, in a non-Jewish region, lives – if we use that term loosely - a man who is so tormented he has to be restrained to prevent him from harming himself or others. In Mark’s Gospel we learn that he was constantly crying and bruising himself with rocks. (Mark 5) The chains that are used to bind him are no match for his strength. When Jesus meets him, he is living among the dead; a homeless, naked, cave dweller.

We really cannot say why he is the way he is. Some would prefer to interpret the demon possession as mental illness, which is plausible. He speaks of many voices in his head, a multitude of voices that torment him. Today he might be diagnosed with [schizophrenia](https://www.bing.com/search?q=disorganized+schizophrenia&filters=ufn%3a%22disorganized+schizophrenia%22+sid%3a%223363e1fc-0711-d0ac-df78-5cdbe63c9658%22&FORM=SNAPST) or bi-polar disorder or any number and combination of very real mental health issues. It must have been terrifying for the community, a people who believed that a demon was in their midst. Chained and guarded, he would have been frightening. Unchained, unguarded and roaming the tombs, he would have been terrifying. A life of misery for him. A life of fear for the community.

Until Jesus comes to him from across the water. Jesus, who with only a word, had calmed a storm on the sea, now calms the storm raging within this man. “Legion” is the name he gives, a name for the demons in his head. Jesus, at the request of the demons, sends them not into the abyss, but into a herd of pigs. Ironically, the pigs carry them into the abyss, and they drown in the sea. The next time someone says the Bible is boring, direct them to Luke 8.

The pig herders (who probably did not own the pigs, but were day laborers), rush back to town because, well, who can keep a story like this to yourself? You have to tell somebody!! And this is when the story gets really interesting. Not the demons, not the drowning pigs, but the reaction of the villagers and Legion’s request is what I find fascinating.

Wouldn’t you expect the townspeople to rush out to see the man who has cured Legion? Wouldn’t you expect the mothers and fathers to bring any ailing children so that they, too, could be made well? Wouldn’t you expect friends and neighbors to carry the sick, the blind, the lame, the deaf out to meet this healer? Isn’t that what happens in so many of the stories? Jesus heals someone, the word spreads, and a mob appears. *Not here.*

ALL the people came out to meet Jesus and ask him…if he would…please leave. As my big brother used to say to me when I was being annoying, “Don’t go away mad, *just go away.”* This is the moment in the story that blows my mind. Instead of embracing awe, they embrace fear. Jesus introduces health and wholeness and freedom to their community. They no longer have to live in fear of Legion. No more attempts to guard him. No more need to have a bake sale to raise money for stronger, heavier chains to tie down Legion. Legion is free, and their community will not be the same – in a good way! Shouldn’t they be dancing? Shouldn’t they be celebrating? Shouldn’t they be having a potluck??

We can’t help but wonder who instilled such fear in the people. Could it have been the pig farmer? He just lost a lot of money on soggy bacon. The same justice that brought Legion to health, just destroyed his profits. Maybe we should chew on that a little. Who inspired such fear in them, and why did they buy it? For those in places in privilege, an undermining of the system can really rock your world. There’s something to muse over in your spare time. Why the fear? We will never know.

Then, finally, there is the moment that breaks my heart. Legion turns to Jesus and says, “May I come with you across the sea?” He asks if he may get in the boat and be a disciple, and Jesus says “no.” He says, “no.” It might have been different if the community had responded with joy. It might have been different if the people had understood. Knowing that the people are still lost, Jesus leaves them a missionary. He leaves them with Legion. It must have been a hard thing for Jesus to do: to look into Legion’s now clear, peaceful eyes and to not be able to give him his heart’s desire. But Jesus knew if he had taken Legion along, it would have been like a traveling side show. Step right up and hear about the demon possessed man! Watch him break his chains before your very eyes!

No, *strangers* didn’t need to hear the story. Legion’s own community needed to hear his story. The very people who knew the trajectory of his life, needed to continue to wrestle with how his life, both before and after his healing, had affected them. Legion needed a place where he was known, in all his brokenness.

Jesus didn’t give Legion a new name. He could have. But maybe that was the work for the community. Maybe that was Legion’s work. Maybe together they would forge a new name. But maybe that name – Legion - would be just fine because it could take on a new meaning…the sense of community.

Jesus told Legion to tell the story of what God had done…to people who knew the plotline, but who had not yet embodied its meaning. They needed to keep hearing the story because we all need to keep hearing the story. We need to hear restoration’s story in the Word and we need to share it with one another. We need to hear how God’s story has changed us, remade us, renewed us, restored us.

Think on these things: Just as Jesus placed Legion in that community, encouraged him to stay in that community that had distrusted him, feared him, God has placed you in a particular context. How can you share God’s story right where you are?

And related to that, who has heard your story? Who has heard what God has done for you? How God has been beside you? Who needs to hear your story?

I don’t know how to heal anyone. I certainly don’t know how to cast out demons. I will leave that work to medical professionals and to God. But I can listen to your story and you can listen to mine and as we listen we become participants in restoring community. I believe that is the work we are all called to do: to restore this wide community of God’s people… and then to open ourselves to the change that restoration will bring.

Let us give thanks to our God of transformation! Amen? Amen!