

What Is Your Name?

Luke 8:26-39 (June 19, 2022)

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

Historical Context

For people in the ancient Roman world, however, “Legion” had only one literal meaning: a unit of approximately six thousand Roman soldiers, the occupying army.¹ Suddenly an exorcism takes on social and political significance, and Luke’s word choices throughout the story invite a closer look. When the man confronts Jesus, Luke uses a verb that he employs elsewhere of armies meeting in battle (Luke 14:31). When the demon “seizes” the man? That’s a verb used elsewhere when Christians are arrested and brought to trial (Acts 6:12; 19:29). The words for the hand and foot chains, for binding and guarding, are the same ones that Luke uses in Acts when the disciples are imprisoned. In short, the language of the whole episode evokes the experience of living under a brutal occupying power.

Theme: What Is Your Name?

Much ink has been spilt in recent decades, trying to address what contemporary Christians find troubling about this story: Was the man really possessed by demons, or “just” mentally ill? Isn’t there a danger involved in conflating acute psychological suffering with evil? These are valuable questions but focusing on the stranger parts of the story prevents us from seeing how it can be our story, a story of our here and now.

The story is our story because it begins *precisely* where we ourselves need to begin, and that is with a question. “What is your name?” Jesus asks when he first encounters the possessed man by the lake. Remember, the man approaches Jesus, NOT to ask for help, but to push Jesus away. Maybe to *scare* Jesus away. In all likelihood, his approach is violent and feral. But Jesus asks

for a name, anyway, and by doing so, he begins to recall the broken man to himself. To his humanity, to his beginnings. To his unique and precious identity as a child beloved of God.

What is your name? Has there ever been a more loving, searching question? What would happen if you allowed Jesus to ask it of you? What would happen if you asked it of others? *Who are you?* Who are you, *really*? Beneath the labels and the diagnoses, the pretense and the piety, the fear and the shame? Who are you when no one in this world is looking? What name do you yearn to be called in the lonely stretches of the night? Who were you before you lost yourself? Before something vital in you died? Do you even remember?

Jesus begins where we must begin. With an honest questioning and naming of ourselves. Can we allow him to search us so deeply? Can we hear him asking the tender and intolerable question: What is your name?