

Legion

A Sermon for Sardis Baptist Church

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Luke 8:26-39

I'd like for us to imagine that today's text isn't set 2,000 years ago on the Gentile-side of the lake. Instead, let's imagine that it's happening right here in Charlotte in 2016. Right here on our side of the Galilee.

Our protagonist is still named Legion. And he isn't filled with demons or evil spirits, but rather the disappointment and despair of too many broken headlines: Columbine and Sandy Hook and Mother Emanuel and too many other massacres to count leading up to last week's tragedy in Orlando; ISIS; Syria; Wall Street Bailouts; Lack of affordable housing; Rising incarceration rates; Global Warming; Hate crimes against LGBT and Muslim and Black and other marginalized communities; Torture; Human Trafficking; and on and on and on. Every printed headline, applying more and more pressure. Legion feels the tightness in his chest, in his stomach, in his very soul. Legion can no longer recognize the humanity in this world.

So where does Legion choose to go? Anyplace but here. He removes his clothes, his papers, his very identity, and he retreats into a cemetery of isolation. Legion is held captive to a newsroom of indecency.

Sharon Ringe reminds us that a legion was a division of the Roman army encompassing approximately 6,000 soldiers and an additional 6,000 supporting troops. If you wanted the very definition of power and frequency in ancient Palestine, it seems a Roman legion would do the trick.

Whatever it is that ails Legion holds him captive with indescribable force. And let us be clear, the existence and persistence of hate in this and any other time is an overwhelming force. It was in Jesus' day, and it still is in ours. And too often, it's easier to submit to such a force rather than to resist.

But that's beauty of the text we read today. The text tells us that God's is a power even greater than a Roman legion, even greater than twelve thousand demons, even greater than anything we can ever imagine. God's is a power so great, even the forces of our own captivity fear it. And even better, God's is a power that works for good.

Not only did God, through the healing hands of Jesus, free Legion from the forces that subdued him (I'll leave it to your own imaginations to determine the logistics of such a liberation), but God helped usher Legion back into the community of the living. That's what God does. God has these fingers that find a way to reach us in times of despair, in times of distress, in times of peril. And like a father, God's strong hands grasp us, and reel us into arms and a chest that hold us with the softness of a mother's embrace.

There's another interesting part of this story. The powers that overwhelmed Legion, upon recognizing the presence of God, begged not be thrown into an abyss. Instead, they asked Jesus if they could enter a large herd of swine. And once they did, these hundreds or thousands of pigs, marched down the hill, and drowned in the sea.

My friend Jack Norwood would call this a devastation of the local agricultural economy. Imagine a dairy farmer losing all his/her cows, or a hog-farming village in Eastern North Carolina losing all its hogs.

Hey, Jesus, we're glad you healed Legion and all, but will our community ever recover from such an economic trauma?!?

Or here's one better. Imagine that God freed our modern-day Legion from the curse of so many broken headlines. And tomorrow in Charlotte, chronic homelessness suddenly stopped. Those demons that prevented affordable-housing for so long finally gave in, but in their rush to drown in the sea they managed to send Bank of America and Wells Fargo into default.

I wonder, how excited we would be about healing so powerful it shook the very foundations of our society?

If we keep reading the text, Luke makes it clear that such shockwaves caused a real sense of fear among this Galilean community. The townspeople, upon seeing Legion now strangely calm and clothed, and validating the stories of the swineherders' lost animals, and laying eyes on Jesus himself, they became afraid. And they said, "Jesus, you need to go away from here!"

Sharon Ringe marvels at this irony. Roman legions controlled this region for decades by implementing a system of institutionalized domination. Rome dominates its subjects militarily, socially, politically, and economically. And yet Luke, with thinly-veiled symbolism, writes of a legion of other-worldly forces being over-powered by Jesus, a Galilean peasant. And the power of Jesus is so great, it forces these beings to not only destroy themselves, but to also destroy the economic systems they've created.

And yet how do the people respond? They are comfortable with the systems that oppress them. Rather than embracing the bigness, and mystery, and comfort that comes with a powerful God (albeit a God that is sometimes terrifying in every sense of the word), the people still

cling to the powers of this world. Rome may marginalize them, Rome may abuse them, Rome may chew them up and spit them out, but at least they see it coming. For the townspeople, there is more comfort in the torment of Rome, than in the in-breaking of God's realm.

So Jesus hops back in his boat. And the disciples tag along. They're off to the next village, in hopes another community might be ready to embrace such a realm.

Legion, now whole again, begs Jesus to let him come with them. But Jesus says, "No you must stay here. Stay here, and proclaim how much God has done for you. And so he did!"

And that's where Legion is in every age. He's one who God has noticed. He's one who's been marginalized, de-humanized, discarded by the powers of this world. But still, he's one who does not stand outside the breadth and the reach of God's mercy. What has God done for Legion? God has shown Legion that the goodness of the Lord does indeed reside in the land of the living.

And if each of us in this room is honest, really honest with ourselves, God has also displayed such goodness, and such mercy and such healing in our own lives. And our task, in any age, whether we're coping with Orlando, or grieving agricultural ruin, or fighting tirelessly for the rights of the marginalized, our task is to proclaim what God has done for us. For when we proclaim God's good news, we maintain the hope that such good news will empower us to embrace the shockwaves of God's in-breaking realm.

May God give us such courage this day and every day!!! Amen.