

**Mar 24** I Am Legion

Luke 8:26-39

Luke 8:27 says, “As [Jesus] 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.” And verse 29b says, “Many times the demon 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.”

Can you picture him, stark naked, stark raving mad, with his long untamed hair and beard, broken shackles around his hands and feet, dirty and with the look of a mad man in his eyes? The townspeople were so afraid of him that the only place he could live was among the tombs. I love this—Jesus traveled by boat for hours, enduring a storm, and who does he meet? He is met by this man who was worse than a nobody. He was an outcast who was not in his right mind.

In the first century world, afflictions that could not be explained otherwise, including depression, various forms of mental illness, epilepsy, muteness, and even unexplained fevers would be explained as the work of demons. In the early church demons were also understood to be the source of temptation and the voices that seek to lure people from God. Incantations, prayers and odd treatments were used in exorcisms. For example, things like burning a rotting fish were supposed to drive away demons. Ordinary priests and physicians saw casting out these demons as a part of their healing work.

Remember, Luke writes his gospel so that you might know who Jesus is, and what he stands for, and through him, that you might know who God is. What do these stories of Jesus’ concern for the demon possessed tell us about God’s concern for the mentally and spiritually afflicted? And what do they tell us about the power of God?

Let’s see what happens next. “When 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.’ Jesus then asked him, ‘What is your name?’ He said, ‘Legion’; for many demons had entered him.”

I want you to notice that this man had many demons. The demon calls itself “Legion.” A legion was the basic military unit of the Roman army containing about 5,600 soldiers. There is some irony in this story that first century readers would not have missed. The name of the demon just happens to be the name of Rome’s finest, most powerful military units. I can’t help but think that there is a political commentary in this story—the legions being likened to demons. Anyway, we have a man with a slew of demons, a legion of them, which would make him very powerful. The townspeople had chained him and tried to subdue him, but they could not. But when the man sees Jesus, before Jesus says a word, he falls at his feet, acknowledges that Jesus is the “Son of the Most High,” then begs Jesus for mercy! The demons surrender, quaking in fear.

Let’s see what happens next: “The demons begin trying to negotiate with Jesus. “Please, don’t send us back to the Abyss. There are some pigs over there. Maybe we could go into them? Yeah, send us into the pigs!” The demons may have thought they could put one over on Jesus. “Send us to the pigs”—then, when Jesus leaves they go back to tormenting this man.

Here’s an important point: demons like to negotiate. We might call them different words today, but much of what tormented people in Jesus’ day are still around and they are still trying to negotiate with us. They rationalize, justify, and do all they can to lure, or persuade us to do what will enslave us, or discredit us, or sap the life out of us. If we struggle with resentment, the demons encourage us to focus on the wrong done to us. If we struggle with alcohol, it is a whisper telling us one little drink won’t matter. When we’re depressed the demons tell us, “It’s always going to be like this.” For most of us the word “demon” could be synonymous with the voice we hear in our heads telling us the exact opposite of what scripture and the Holy Spirit call us to do. This voice seems bent on neutralizing our impact for God, on robbing us of joy and life, of enslaving us to things that promise life but deliver death. These voices may keep us afraid and filled with anxiety, or lead us to self-destructive behavior. Some hear these voices telling them life will always be as bleak as it is today, that there is no hope. For some it is bitterness and hate they hear whispered in their heart day after day, week after week. For some it leads to addiction, for others to saying and doing things that will discredit

them or hurt others. They control those who welcome these demonic thoughts and entertain them over a long period of time. Don't negotiate with the demons. They will outsmart you.

Don't be discouraged! This story is meant to show us that Christ is infinitely more powerful than the demons! 5,600 demons in a man, and when Jesus shows up he falls down and begs at Jesus feet for mercy. It is not even a fair fight. Jesus has power over the demons. When we turn to him and trust him and his words and invoke his name the demons in our lives quake. We don't have to be afraid of the demons. We don't need to give in to them. They shake at the thought of Christ.

We all have our own demons. It might be the fear of inadequacy, or self-doubt. It might be the call to perfection. It might be voices of criticism. It could be even darker thoughts. But the good news is that Jesus is more powerful than whatever wants to control us.

In the first church that I served a couple's son committed suicide right in front of his father. The last words the father heard from his son were, "It's all your fault" before he pulled the trigger. The father spiraled down into a stew of depression, alcohol addiction, anger and more. He had a legion of demons. His wife was an active member of the church, was in counseling and went to ALANON. She made sure the other children were in support groups. He could hold things together during the week, but on Friday he would stop at the liquor store on the way home and not quit drinking until late Sunday evening. He excused his behavior by saying it was the only way to blot out the pain. It went on for years, decades. The demons seemed to have triumphed. The only time he would stay a bit sober on the weekends was when his daughter was doing something at church. He would come and see her. Also, he read his Bible. His wife shared with me the incredible moment in his life. One Sunday as she was getting ready for church he looked at her through an alcohol haze and said, "I don't want to live like this anymore." She invited him to church and he accepted. That afternoon they talked and he said, "Will you help me?" She said, "I can do a little, but God can do so much more." They got down on their knees and he asked Jesus to destroy his cravings. She did not say that those cravings immediately vanished but for the first time ever he asked

her about AA groups and she went with him. The first week was rough. As Friday approached, he was worried. Three of his new AA buddies met him at work, did not let him stop at the liquor store and spent the weekend with him. The first time he had been sober on a Saturday in over 20 years. Soon, he went to counseling. He also attended church. The last six or seven years of his life, before he died of a heart attack, he was active in the church, serving in leadership positions, leading the AA group and helping others. It all began when he realized his demons did not have ultimate power over him.

In this story, we hear of a man who has a legion of demons and yet falls down in front of Jesus. It isn't even a fair fight. Jesus always wins, if we let him into our lives. Whatever demons you might be facing, big ones like depression or addiction, or smaller ones like questions of self-worth or fear of tomorrow, know that when you let Jesus show up life will change. The changes may take time, they may be challenging and you might learn you need medical or psychological help, but they can be defeated because those things don't stand a chance. This is the good news. No one is ultimately beyond hope.