

DWELLING AMONG THE DEAD

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Text: Luke 8:26-39

Then they arrived at the country of the Gerasenes, which is opposite Galilee. As 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. 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'— for 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.) Jesus then asked him, 'What is your name?' He said, 'Legion'; for many demons had entered him. They begged him not to order them to go back into the abyss.

Now 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. Then 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.

When the swineherds saw what had happened, they ran off and told it in the city and in the country. Then 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. Those who had seen it told them how the one who had been possessed by demons had been healed. Then 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. The man from whom the demons had gone begged that he might be with him; but Jesus sent him away, saying, '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.

He's been living in a graveyard for who knows how long, dwelling among the dead, without a name, without an identity, without a past. Whoever he once was, that person is long gone. "Crazy" everyone calls him now, reducing him to an ailment, writing him off as something less than human.

So he wanders the tombs, naked, alone, forgotten, neglected, ashamed. Never knowing peace. Never knowing comfort. Never knowing even a single kindness. Cut off from society. Devoid of humanity. A lost cause, many would say. Maybe he used to be someone. Maybe he used to have a family, friends, people who loved him. Maybe he used to have things he wanted to accomplish, things he aspired to. But not anymore. All that's gone. His life has been hijacked by a whole host of maladies. In fact, he's given himself the name "Legion" because so many swirling, chaotic forces have taken up residence inside him, twisting him into something unrecognizable.

Everyone in the nearby village is terrified of him. And yet they tolerate this boogeyman who runs around at all hours, babbling to himself out there beyond the fields where they go to work everyday and the houses where they go to bed every night. That's how they've learned to live with the situation. They can't control him. They can't restrain him. They've tried, and he's too strong. So they leave him alone as long as he keeps his distance. They accept his presence as long as he stays where he belongs, out on the fringes, where for the most part they don't have to deal with him. It's an uneasy truce they've established.

And then one day Jesus comes along and disturbs the peace.

Right away the man recognizes Jesus. He calls him "Son of the Most High God," and he begs him, "do not to torment me." And whether it's him saying that or the demons that have taken over his mind, it's hard to tell.

Not that it matters to the people in the town. Either way, they see him as nothing but a monster. But not Jesus. He sees things differently. He looks at this pathetic, lonely creature, and he sees what others do not. He sees the person who's still in there, the person who's not beyond reach, the person who didn't ask for any of this, and he's filled with compassion.

The demons seem to know that Jesus has power over them, and they plead with him not to send them into oblivion, but to let them go instead into a herd of pigs grazing on a hillside nearby. So Jesus gives them permission, and immediately the man is restored to his right mind. He calms down, he puts on some clothes, and he wants to become a follower of Jesus. And it seems like that's the end of the story, but there's more.

Once word gets around about what happened, all the people from the surrounding area come out to see for themselves, and instead of thanking Jesus and welcoming their formerly possessed neighbor back into the community, they ask Jesus to leave. They show him the door. Because according to Luke, "they were seized with great fear," which seems like kind of a strange reaction. Jesus just did a wonderful thing. He gave this man his life back, and he lifted a dark cloud that's been hanging over the place for years. Why would that make people afraid?

I don't know for sure, but I have a theory. I think it's because having the power of God come along and completely blow up their reality is unsettling, even if that reality was a total nightmare. It was what they were used to. It was what they knew. And there's a lot of comfort in that.

So they tell Jesus to leave and don't come back, and that's what he's fixing to do when the man from whom the demons had gone comes up and begs to go with him. But Jesus sends him away, saying, "Return to your home, and declare how much God has done for you." He wants the man to go and tell the story of his healing, to spread the good news among those who'd written him off. He wants him to be a living, breathing parable of the power of God to transform even the most tragic situations, and the most broken people, into beacons of promise and hope.

And when I sit back and reflect a little, I think he wants the same thing from us. I think that's the point of the story. Because sooner or later, we all spend time living in graveyards, dwelling among the dead, cut off from the living, our lives hijacked by all kinds of demons. The list is legion. Anger and bitterness. Loss and regret. Addiction. Physical and mental illness. Racism, homophobia, and other kinds of prejudice. Poverty and despair. Fear and suspicion. Guilt and shame. Violence and abuse. And on and on and on. We could be here all day naming all the things that hold us down, diminish our lives, steal our happiness, separate us from community, pull us away from the ones we love, and erase who we are.

But God has power over all these swirling, chaotic forces that take up residence inside us. That's the message we hear this morning, and that's the message we're called to proclaim. God has power to heal us just like Jesus heals the man in the story. God has power to free us from whatever has us in its grip. God has power to bring us back from the places of death and despair where we sometimes get lost.

But the question is, do we really believe that? Enough to go out into the world and share it? Or are we maybe a little bit like the people from the surrounding area, who send Jesus away? Have we learned to live with our demons? Are we so used to them that we can't imagine living any other way? I can't answer those questions for you. You have to answer them for yourselves. But I can tell you what I've been learning recently.

As most of you know, my family and I have been going through a mental health crisis with my youngest daughter. And I'm happy to say she's doing a lot better. She's in an outpatient program now that really seems to be helping. But still, her road to recovery isn't going to be like what we see in the gospel. There isn't going to be a big, dramatic, instantaneous healing.

My wife and I have talked to a lot of other parents whose kids have gone through similar things, and this is going to be a long process, with good days and bad days,

progress and set-backs. In fact, this may be something Mimi has to live with for the rest of her life.

Which could make a person wonder about God's power to heal and restore. But what I've learned from all of this is that there are lots of different kinds of healing, and it doesn't always come in the form you expect, but it does always come in the form you need.

Mimi still has a ways to go. But already, as a family, the way we interact with each other, and especially with Mimi, has been transformed. Yesterday morning, for instance, Mimi had a bout of depression and refused to get out of bed. And whereas in the past Daisy and I would've seen that as a behavior issue and responded with irritation and anger, now we were able to see it as a medical issue and respond with compassion. For half an hour, I stood there and watched Daisy very patiently and lovingly coax Mimi out of bed, without ever once getting frustrated.

Neither of us had that capacity before. And when I look at that change in us, I see nothing less than the power of God at work in our lives, and for that I'm deeply grateful. Amen.