

6-23-19

Luke 8:26-39

A Social Salvation

“For a long time, he had worn no clothes, and he did not live in a house but in the tombs.” Luke 8:27b

He doesn't even have a name. He is surrounded by pages and chapters and verses, filled with a tradition where names carry meaning, like *Moses* means, *to draw out of water*, and *Adam* comes from the Hebrew word for ground, *adamah*, where *Joshua* and *Jesus* mean, *he saves*; and this man has no name. When Jesus asks, the man answers with what possess him or with what occupies him, 'my name is *Legion for we are many*.' David Lose sees this as a heartbreaking moment, a man so far gone, his identity is known only by the hoard of demons that have taken him over.¹

Luke's gospel (and Mark's) describe the Gerasene Demoniac in vivid, frightening detail. He sounds terrifyingly mad. The Boo Radley of the New Testament; only we know Boo wore clothes and was a gentle giant. The Gerasene man we encounter in this story, makes us uneasy. Uneasy because we don't really talk about demons and possession in our worship hour on Sunday mornings. We read this nowadays and say, that the ancients really didn't understand mental illness the way we do today. We're better at taking care of it now.

Lucy Turner, one our former associate pastors told me the story of how one Sunday morning, at her large, downtown mostly white Presbyterian church in Birmingham, Alabama, a woman off the street, (she was a known prostitute and addict) - wearing hardly a thing: a neon pink spandex dress and 6 in. heels, came through the narthex doors, clicking her way down the long slate floor aisle. She was both muttering and shouting as if she was talking to someone in particular when she threw herself at the steps of the chancel wailing loudly, "I want to be pure again, Jesus!" Followed by a quick, "No you don't!" "I want to be pure again!"

I mean we just don't know what to do with this alarming display of our brother, our sister, taken over by something beyond their control. So often we offer them the margins, somewhere out of sight, out of mind. We offer them

¹ David Lose, Legion <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?m=4377&post=2609>

the edges of community where no one has to be caught off guard by who they are.

According to Luke, Jesus had just calmed the stormy sea and winds on the sea of Galilee - commanding the waves and wind to be still. The disciples are shocked - wondering about Jesus's identity, "Who then is this, that he commands even the winds and the water, and they obey him?" (Lk.8:25)

Their reaction is odd; how do they not know who Jesus really is; how do they not know what Jesus can do? Because as soon as Jesus stepped from the boat and onto the land this man knows what Jesus can do. Just Jesus's presence on land, strikes fear in the demons making the man's knees buckle in submission - as he shouts at the top of his lungs, "What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God?" It is an echo of Gabriel's announcement to Mary in Luke 2, 'you will call him Jesus and he will be the Son of the Most High God.' There is no wondering about who Jesus is; it should be obvious what Jesus can do...

So, what do you do with a naked man in a graveyard? Did he choose to live there in the shadows or was he driven to live in the tombs? Who would want to live among the dead? He has no home, other than the desecrated shore of graves, where he wildly shouts and in Mark's gospel, he bruises himself with stones. The town's people were likely used to him "going off the deep end," so to speak. Surely, they knew his name. *Oh, that wailing, that is just Crazy Tom. That screaming must be Looney Bill* - we had a Wild Bill that lived in our neighborhood in Hillcrest; but his corner was hardly the edge of the neighborhood... I wonder about this man with no name, don't you? Why didn't he have clothes? Had he ripped them off? Was he sensitive to certain fabrics, the way my kids don't like the way a wool sweater feels or my friend Buz who won't wear jeans because he doesn't like the feel and weight of denim? It strikes me that he's naked - it strikes me quite frankly, because our God, you know, is a seamstress.²

Think back to Adam and Eve the garden: having sinned their eyes were opened, and they knew they were naked and hid from God. The consequence of what happened with the tree, the fruit, the serpent, it was devastating. But it did not mean abandonment *by* God, but more of something like a distance *from* God.

² This comes from the TheoEd Talk with Lauran Winner, Magnolia Trees and Cardigan Sweaters: Unexpected Metaphors for God, <https://vimeo.com/258838358> ; <https://theoed.com/watch>

And with of that devastating distance, the warm, comfortable, sheltered reality shattered and brought Adam and Eve into a colder, exposed and fearful world, where our loving God makes them clothes.

“For a long time he had worn no clothes, and he did not live in a house but in the tombs.”

Wendell Berry writes, “Practice resurrection.”³ And there always has to be a death for there to be resurrection. Is that what we have here? Is this not practicing resurrection when Christ is able to bring a man out from the graves and tombs, out from the dead, from being buried alive deep inside his own self and then freeing him, resurrecting him, clothing him as if he knew how cold, exposed and fearful the man was?

The beauty of course is that Jesus too is, a seamstress; Jesus clothes the man. Jesus casts out from him sure death and restores him to life. That is the beauty of resurrection. The irony in this story is that the man is a Gentile. Luke’s narrative is clear about locating this story geographically for us, “Then they arrived at the country of the Gerasenes, which is opposite Galilee.” (Lk. 8:26) Opposite Galilee - just what is this Jewish rabbi doing on the other side of sea? This is the only time in Luke’s gospel that Jesus ventures into ‘Gentile territory, and the only instance of his ministry taking place outside of the boundaries of the community of the Jews or God-fearers like the centurion who servant was healed.’⁴

The demons are banished, and the towns people come to see what has taken place after a herd of pigs are drowned in the ocean, “they came to Jesus, [and] they found the man from whom the demons had gone sitting at the feet of Jesus, clothed and in his right mind.” (Lk.8:35) He is clothed and in his right mind - not chained and yelling; not naked and wild; he is clothed and in his right mind - in his resurrection there is his salvation. When Jesus freed him from Legion, the man was healed right then and there and was restored back into his neighborhood.

³ Wendell Berry, *Manifesto: The Mad Farmer Liberation Front*, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc. 1973. Also published by Counterpoint Press in *The Selected Poems of Wendell Berry*, 1999; *The Mad Farmer Poems*, 2008; *New Collected Poems*, 2012. <https://cals.arizona.edu/~steidl/Liberation.html>

⁴ Sharon H. Ringe, *Luke* (Westminster Bible Companion, Louisville, KY 1995) pg. 119

So, what was it about that man? Actually, I don't have a solid answer - I wasn't there. But if this is where we find Jesus, even just this once, opposite of where he should be then I am relieved. Because if the Son of the Most High God can decide to go where no one but a legion of demons might know his name; if he can decide to go there and heal someone's innermost torment and restore him to the community, if he can go opposite of Galilee and practice resurrection then salvation is for everyone.

When the man begged to go with Jesus; oddly Jesus says 'no.' Isn't that strange? Usually Jesus is welcoming everyone to come and follow him; leave father and mother, cast aside your fishing nets and come fish for people... but here the man is told to stay put. "Return to your home, and declare how much God has done for you.' So, he went away. Proclaiming through the city how much Jesus had done for him." (Lk.8:39)

In an instant - even before Pentecost, the Spirit, like the wind, is blowing where she wants to. The Gerasene man becomes part of the Jesus movement, an apostle to the Gentiles; *and salvation is social*: the whole point of God's healing and liberation is to restore us to beloved community, to return us to neighborhood, [to Eden] and to call us back to life!⁵

Jesus has been busy bringing God's kingdom in Luke, "he casts out or silences demons who proclaim him as Son of God (4:31-37); he heals the sick with fever (4:38-39), leprosy (5:12-16), paralysis (5:17-21); he raises the dead (7.11-15); he is proclaimed as a prophet (7 16-17); he enters into conflict with the Pharisees over his proclamation of the forgiveness of sins (5.21-26); and he teaches the crowds with authority (6.12-49)."⁶

Christ has been busy bringing the work of God's kingdom into full view. And with the Gerasene Demoniac the implication is that this kingdom might be bigger than just one place, one region, one people, because now salvation is in full view too. The salvation that comes with the kingdom isn't

⁵ <https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2019/6/18/the-beautiful-struggle-salts-lectionary-commentary-for-second-week-after-pentecost>

⁶ Stanley Harstine, An Exegesis of the Character Jesus in Luke 8 Review and Expositor 97, Fall 2000
<http://web.a.ebscohost.com/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=1&sid=3f2ff996-87c1-432a-943d-0f63f217fc6a%40sessionmgr4008>

only just for the interior castle, it is for the everyone and everything even the world's empires.

Salvation came to this naked man in the graveyard and clothed him and restored him to life. Its God's story reimagined and retold again and again. The man was then sent out to proclaim the good news to his place and his time; to declare that this meant salvation was for him, and for his community. And this man knew what it was like to live in a community of fear. He knew what it was like to have good news to proclaim when everyone around was suspicious and fearful of what salvation and liberation might mean for them. But he "...proclaim[s] throughout the city how much Jesus had done for him." Then the story stops.

I want there to be more. I want to hear how the town was changed by the gospel. How the townspeople reacted when this man wouldn't stop talking about his resurrection, his salvation. And then I realize that maybe that's why he doesn't have a name. Because I've got it backwards. Who is **this** man... that even the winds, and the water, and the demons obey him?⁷

Benediction

"For a long time he had worn no clothes, and he did not live in a house but in the tombs."

⁷ Stacy Simpson Duke, Luke 8:26-29, The Truett Pulpit, <https://blogs.baylor.edu/truettpulpit/2016/06/08/luke-826-39/>