

Dead Man Walking

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Scripture: 1 Kings 19:1-15, Luke 8:26-34

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Scripture: 1 Kings 19:1-15

19 Ahab told Jezebel all that Elijah had done, and how he had killed all the prophets with the sword. ²Then Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah, saying, “So may the gods do to me, and more also, if I do not make your life like the life of one of them by this time tomorrow.” ³Then he was afraid; he got up and fled for his life, and came to Beer-sheba, which belongs to Judah; he left his servant there. ⁴But he himself went a day’s journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down under a solitary broom tree. He asked that he might die: “It is enough; now, O LORD, take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors.” ⁵Then he lay down under the broom tree and fell asleep. Suddenly an angel touched him and said to him, “Get up and eat.” ⁶He looked, and there at his head was a cake baked on hot stones, and a jar of water. He ate and drank, and lay down again. ⁷The angel of the LORD came a second time, touched him, and said, “Get up and eat, otherwise the journey will be too much for you.” ⁸He got up, and ate and drank; then he went in the strength of that food forty days and forty nights to Horeb the mount of God.

⁹At that place he came to a cave, and spent the night there. Then the word of the LORD came to him, saying, “What are you doing here, Elijah?” ¹⁰He answered, “I have been very zealous for the LORD, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away.” ¹¹He said, “Go out and stand on the mountain before the LORD, for the LORD is about to pass by.” Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake; ¹²and after the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence. ¹³When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. Then there came a voice to him that said, “What are you doing here, Elijah?” ¹⁴He answered, “I have been very zealous for the LORD, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away.” ¹⁵Then the LORD said to him, “Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus; when you arrive, you shall anoint Hazael as king over Aram.

Luke 8:26-39

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.)³⁰ Jesus then asked him, “What is your name?” He said, “Legion”; for many demons had entered him.³¹ They begged him not to order them to go back into the abyss.³² 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.³³ 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.³⁴ When the swineherds saw what had happened, they ran off and told it in the city and in the country.³⁵ 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.³⁶ Those who had seen it told them how the one who had been possessed by demons had been healed.³⁷ 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.³⁸ The 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.

Proclamation of the Word

I. Dead Man Walking

The scene seems like something out of a horror movie, the mad man chained and shackled, naked, living in the cemetery. He has been pushed out of town for people are afraid of him. They cannot understand or control him. He is not really living the life he was intended...to have a home, a family, a job. Something has taken hold of him and his life is a living hell. No one wants to be near him, his affliction has made everyone uneasy with him. He is pushed outside of town so they will not have to see him and be uncomfortable. And the man is cut off from relationships with anybody except the dead in the cemetery. In fact, he might as well be dead himself! He has been given up for dead. This does seem like a scene from Night of the Living Dead.

What we know is that Jesus shows up- in this living hell and is approached by the man living in the Gerasenes- gentile country, opposite the Jewish villages- literally the other side. And Jesus is not afraid to go to the other side opposite Galilee, his home. That is who Jesus is- he is the Lord of Life and he is not afraid of going where others will not tread. Jesus comes as he does always in Luke’s gospel announcing the Kingdom of God come near. The man, eaten up with demons, has already lost his life- he may be walking and breathing but he has no quality of life. Jesus is not afraid to confront death and stare it in the eyes. The man’s pain and distortion does not scare Jesus.

The man has become a lost soul and his very self. As Alzheimer sufferers usually feel, they describe feeling like one is losing his or her very SELF. Alzheimers disease causes personhood to slip away slowly. The man living in the tombs was faced with losing himself to the power of the demons which possessed him.

II. Fear of change

The reactions to the visit of this powerful Jesus are swift and intense. The demons realize immediately that they are in the presence of a power greater than their own. They represent the forces of evil and oppression that are active in our lives and in the world, and these forces always tremble when they come before the dynamic presence of God's reign.

With all the talk of demons, we might be tempted to put this text at arm's length finding it hard to relate. But while we do not see the world as the ancients did, we certainly know what it can be like for folks to be living, walking, and breathing, but enduring a personal hell.

Perhaps you have come face to face with such "demons." A Personal hell might come in the form of addiction, abuse.

It can be obsession with perfection or work which damages relationships.

Or it may find itself manifested in self-harm like cutting one's self or an eating disorder.

Such behaviors are pushed to the margins, hidden, and scary to those living with the dis-ease and uncomfortable for those who live with such things.

But the personal is always connected to what goes on in one's community and vice-versa. Some demons lurk in attitudes, structures, and acts of the larger community. Sin lurks in the tombs of society or in the guise of good order.

Some of us have read a recent book called *The Help* and will/have discussed it during the Sunday school hour today. The novel, while fiction, brings to light some of the attitudes and practices of racism. Set in Jackson, Mississippi in the early 1960's, the story of the black maids and their relationship with the white families for whom they work. As good stories do it brings to light the insidious subtleties of racism as practiced in the South at one time. I say subtleties because when it is the air you breathe, it is unrecognizable. To readers 50 years later, the racism appears overt and apparent. In *The Help* Hilly Holbrook the queen bee of the Junior League starts a campaign for white folks to provide a separate toilet for their black help in her words for the *Home Help Sanitation Initiative- a disease preventative measure*. In a time of separate toilets, schools, and neighborhoods, we can see that folks who are different and feared get pushed to the margins. The disease she feared most in the form of toilet sanitation, was simply a metaphor for the disease of racism and the uneasiness, harm and destruction it brought upon both the victims and proponents.

The man with the demons was too hard to watch, so the community pushed him to the edge of town and chained him up, criminalizing his condition. They were so afraid of him and what he might do. In our history with racism or other differences, the human community has a way of pushing things and people to the recesses who offend good order. But, I imagine, it did not seem strange to the folks of the Gerasenes town that this man needed to be shackled and kept away from everyone else.

Jesus meets the man head on and confronts the demons. He commands the demons showing his authority even over the demonic powers of sin. And an amazing thing happens- the man is liberated, set free from those afflictions. He is clothed and in his right mind the Bible states. But Change is hard to deal with. The man is no longer identified only by the demons. His personhood, dignity and humanity are restored by Jesus. I would expect the townsfolk to be celebrating. Instead the Bible says, "They were seized with fear." I can only imagine that his friends, family and neighbors were perplexed and did not know how to deal with this new man. And if Jesus can cause change, setting this captive free, imagine how he might upset and change us.

In the case of racist systems, I remember hearing my Grandmother who was from the Charleston area talk about "when freedom came." Just yesterday many in our nation celebrated Juneteenth- the day when freedom came- the end to slavery as a law in the United States on the date June 19, 1865. Folks in the south, white and black, slave and free, did not know how to behave. It was a legal shift that happened, but attitudes, culture, and mindsets take a long, long time as we continue to seek to overcome the evils of slavery. But my Grandmother said, that those slaves who were set free did not want to leave. At least they knew how to function in their current state. Plus, reality was there really were not any other options in place. And southern white folks were not setting up new structures to address the ills. The proverb rings true, "Better the Devil you know than the devil you don't" so while the law changed the patterns did not.

Jesus does not meet the man and simply listen to his troubles, he acts with the power of God, upsetting the demons, the swine, the swineherders, and the folks who may have benefited from the man's afflictions. Otherwise, healing and transformation would never had happened.

III. Mission to Home- stay not go

When the man was set free, clothed and in his right mind. We can understand that he wanted to go with Jesus and follow him, start afresh. Certainly it would have been easier for the townsfolk to not have to deal with the changed man. But what Jesus does is send him home to tell what God has done in his life. He is sent back home to testify, to witness to what has happened.

Jesus says you have to go back home. They need to know. But the reaction of the people was fear. The Bible says they were afraid...afraid of Jesus' power....afraid of the change that had just happened...maybe afraid for the swineherds who lost their livelihood when the demons entered the swine and drowned.

But that is what happens when you encounter the Lord of Life in Jesus Christ. Things change. Lives are transformed. People are set free. But sometimes that freedom is scary. It requires responsibility and work.

In the case of the man who had lost himself to "Legion" the name given him by the demons that possessed him, he was given a new name, child of God. He was clothed and in his right mind...being made right. And he would go back to his town to do the hard work of making right the relationships that had divided and tortured him. He was no longer a dead man walking, but a man made alive by the power of God to be the person God created and called him to be. And the people he knew before would have to work hard to overcome their judgments and expectations.

This man is considered the 1st Missionary to the Gentiles. He was one of their own who had experienced the transforming power of Jesus Christ in their lives and lived to tell the story...

I imagine if he were here today, he would tell all who fear the changes required for healing, mending, and making right the evils which torture and harm, it is worse to remain stuck and possessed by the death threatening forces. Jesus offers a new way, a way that leads to life and life abundant. Do not be afraid...