

Legion

A Meditation on Luke 8:26-39

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*Jesus then asked him, "What is your name?" He said, "Legion."
– Luke 8:30*

"If you want to go swimming," the professor said, "don't forget your bathing suit." His words caught me off guard. Our study group was up on the Golan Heights visiting archaeological digs. Swimming was not on the itinerary. Where was the prof taking us? An unannounced site on Lake Tiberius? An earlier-than-planned visit to the Dead Sea? A side trip to the Mediterranean?

None of the above. We were heading to Hamat Gader, six miles southeast of the Sea of Galilee, in the demilitarized zone along the Jordanian border, where we could see Syrian soldiers stationed on the nearby mountaintops. The experience, one might say, was surreal.

At the entrance, near the abandoned station where the Turkish railroad once made its last stop in Palestine, Israeli soldiers stopped the bus to check our papers. Ahead we could see more Israeli troops patrolling the driveway and perimeter fence. It was the only time I ever went swimming under the watchful eyes of lifeguards carrying automatic weapons. Eerie.

There are trampolines at Hamat Gader. I paused to watch two Israeli soldiers, one male and one female, weapons leaning against the fence, holding hands, jumping up-and-down, smiling, laughing, having a grand old time, like 18, 19, and 20-year-olds should be enjoying. Still, strange to see uniformed warriors bouncing and giggling like little kids.

Hamat Gader hosts the Middle East's only crocodile farm. But it is not the primeval reptilians that attract visitors. It is the hot springs gushing up through cracks in the black volcanic rock, water heated by molten magma in the depths of the Earth, water rushing with such force that it is impossible to hold on to the rails where it enters the pools. Temperature where swimming: 107°. In the southernmost pool – "The Frying Spring" – 125°. Steam rising in ghostly patterns. Water smelling of burning sulfur. The Greek geographer, Strabo, wrote of these waters: "when animals taste it, they lose hair, hoofs, and horns."¹ Bizarre.

¹ Murphy-O'Connor, Jerome. *Holy Land: An Archaeological Guide from Earliest Times to 1700*. 2nd Ed. New York: Oxford University Press, 1986. Page 218.

Where it is written that Jesus and the disciples “arrived at the country of the Gerasenes, which is opposite Galilee,” that indicates they are in the region of Hamat Gader -- where Aramaic and Hebrew are not primary languages...where Judaism and its laws are not practiced...where Kosher tables are not kept...where hogs are raised and butchered for meat...where the twelve are well out of their comfort zone...where even Jesus’ encounters appear unreal.

Disembarking on the Galilean shoreline, the disciples are met by a nude person, as naked as the day he was born, shouting at them. Why was he running around without any clothes? I do not know. What I know is that the sudden appearance of a screaming naked stranger would unnerve me, cause my fear reaction to pump adrenaline, set my senses on the defensive.

Given his state of undress, Jesus would have noticed his prison-readied muscles, the cuts on his arms, the scars on his legs, all the places rubbed raw from ropes and chains – evidence of the terror his presence struck in the town’s people. Mark describes him more fully:

He lived among the tombs; and no one could restrain him anymore, even with a chain; for he had often been restrained with shackles and chains, but the chains he wrenched apart, and the shackles he broke in pieces; and no one had the strength to subdue him. Night and day among the tombs and on the mountains he was always howling and bruising himself with stones. – Mark 5:3-5

Fearing for their safety, the town’s people keep him under 24-hour surveillance, adds Luke. What must his life have been like, believed to be possessed by evil spirits, a cemetery’s gravestones his only home?

Jesus asks his name. None is given, as if even he, like the town’s people, considers himself more a wild animal than a human being. Instead, from deep within, comes the word “legion” – as in Roman legion, five to six thousand military personnel formed into a feared and hated occupying force. “‘Legion,’ he responded, for many demons had entered him,” writes Luke. “Legion” also can be translated “mob” – which carries an equally destructive but far more unruly sense.

I never believed in demon possession, never witnessed an exorcism, never watched *The Exorcist*. While a student, I did uncover an exorcism ritual buried in the Princeton Theological Seminary library. I never used it, though the school’s history records a former President being called out of bed in the middle of the night to exorcise ghosts inhabiting a campus building.

While the scriptures do speak of demon possession, I have always understood that as an ill-informed description of someone suffering from a physical ailment or a mental illness, from an ancient time when medical knowledge was not as advanced as today. Evil, it has always seemed to me, is to be found in individual and corporate decisions and actions, for which responsibility and accountability must be taken. “The Devil made me do it” just does not cut it.

But, at the same time, I must admit things do happen that only can begin to be explained by the existence of evil forces. I get what the southern author, Pat Conroy, is saying when he writes:

I toured the concentration camp at Dachau and looked at the pictures of the piled bodies, starved and faceless, being shoved by bulldozers into mass burial pits. I stared at the furnace where Jews were reduced to piles of Jewish ash, and felt I stood [at] a monument to the infinite inhumanity of man and society gone insane, a ground washed by thousands of gallons of human blood, a ground astir with ghosts and memories of Jews and Germans trapped in a drama so horrible and unreal that the world could never have the same purity again... If man was good, then Dachau could never have happened. Simple as that... [A]ll the paint and clay of the Louvre [cannot] dim the memory of one photograph: of a mother leading her small children to the gas chamber.²

Moreover, I must confess noticing my language changing over the last several years, so that I find myself often wondering what is possessing people that makes them believe and behave in such ungodly ways and see nothing wrong in what they are saying and doing. Like arguing there was no insurrection and, even if there was, it was a patriotic act. Like militias traveling across country to create a riot at a peaceful Pride event in Idaho. Like Black people being gunned down by a white person in Buffalo, and not recognizing the racism that clings to our national soul like sin. Like sending our church staff an anti-Semitic email last week, calling me a “demonic” leader -- “a Jew” involved in a plot to undermine Christianity at Glenview Community Church.

Extreme cases, I know. Yet, what is possessing us that we continue to allow such verbal and physical violence to continue in our society, accepting it as a regrettable part of life, shrugged off in America to a degree far greater than anywhere else in the world?

Jesus drives the demons out of the man. Luke reports they beg not to be ordered “back into the abyss” – into the deep, into the bottomless pit, into the roiling waters of chaos. So, Jesus sends them into a large herd of swine, which runs as fast as their short chubby legs can carry them down the steep slope into the Sea of Galilee, where they drown in waters they themselves make turbulent and churning, at the southern end of the Golan Heights, close to Hamat Gader.

The reaction of the residents is instructive. The swine herders hike it out of there as fast as their little legs will carry them, more comfortable working around evil than to be in the presence of Jesus, spreading word throughout the town and countryside of what happened. The Gerasenes, in turn, rush out of their homes, businesses, and pools to see for themselves.

Arriving at the lakeshore, they see the man now fully clothed and in his right mind. But notice: no one says, “How wonderful!” No one welcomes the man back into the community. No one takes a knee before Jesus, or invites Jesus to stay for a while, or confesses a single word of curiosity, let alone belief, in Jesus and his ways.

² Conroy, Pat. *The Water is Wide: A Memoir*. New York: Dial Press, 2002. Page 10.

No doubt, also taking in the sight of the bloated pig carcasses floating in the water and realizing that Jesus had just cost them lots of money and likely would demand even more of them, they become afraid – scared of the God Jesus represents. They order Jesus and his disciples back into their boat, to go away and never return.

Amazing how comfortable we can become with the status quo, with the way things are, with what we always have done, with the evil we already know and in which we participate, especially when the continuation of that evil proves profitable, and confrontation of that evil demands change, and the elimination of that evil can prove costly. Amazing how we prefer either doing nothing or actively rejecting what is good and of God.

Understandable under the circumstances, the unnamed man whom the demons no longer possess expresses a desire to join Jesus, to be numbered among his followers, to climb into the boat and row with the disciples as far away from there as possible.

But Jesus tells him to stay.

Someone needs to speak of a different way. Someone needs to tell the truth about the presence and power of a benevolent spirit greater than any demonic force. Someone needs to give witness to the God of goodness and love.

Someone then and there.

Someone here and now.