

In the Name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

<sup>27</sup>And as [Jesus] stepped out on land, there met him a man from the city who had demons; for a long time he had worn no clothes, and he lived not in a house but among the tombs.(Luke 8:27)

This poor man belonged to others, as each of us does, yet none of them are in sight as this story commences. Mother and father, sister and brother: they live in homes, most likely, but this man lives among the tombs. Chains and bands cannot hold the man. The demons within him break the fetters and he escapes, but in escaping, he flees into loneliness there in the graveyards. What a forlorn existence this man has! Cats prowl the graveyard, dogs wonder there, owls hoot in the nighttime, and this man – created and meant by God for dignity and love – he dwells there too, in the land of the dead.

When he was a boy, he might have held promise. Surely, mother and father thought so, for that is the nature of parents: they think their little ones special, and they are right to do so. As a boy, he might have had definite gifts for things, like whittling or whistling or drawing or building things. His parents might have believed that he would prove a strong blessing for this world. Other townsfolk might have thought so too.

But something went wrong along the way. Our text does not tell us why life went bad for this boy. He might have been innocent, but suddenly exposed to an evil spirit that overwhelmed him and marred him deeply. The world might have been cruel to him. A relative, a neighbor, a priest! might have betrayed him and abused him. He might simply have been swept away by the wickedness of others.

Or, he might bear responsibility for his plight. He might have participated in his demonic possession. Against all advice, he might have learned drunkenness, which slipped into crack cocaine, which slipped into perversions of various sorts, until bit by bit, he lost his humanity and made himself a stranger to law-abiding society.

We do not know the cause of this man's misery, but we have a strong picture of that misery. The plight of the Prodigal Son we can understand. He goes off into a far country and ruins his substance in riotous living, until poverty at last brings him to his sense. But this man's case is worse. There is no coming to his senses for this man. Chains can't hold him. The appeal of mother and father cannot hold him. He dwells in deserts, he dwells among tombs. He dwells in awful loneliness. It would be no wonder if he should howl with the coyotes at night – crying with sorrow over his loneliness and his poverty.

He is demon possessed, our text says. This is no mere sickness. In its essence, this is not mental illness, this is not personality defect, this is not convulsive illness, this is not medicine, but demonic possession. The man shudders, the man trembles at the presence of Jesus, for he is overwhelmed by demons, and the demons hate Jesus. They know Jesus right well, and reject him. They'd rather flee into pigs, jump into the sea, and be choked to death by the water, rather than to come to peace with Jesus. Some people reject Jesus because they do not yet know him. But the demons know him, and hate him. They want nothing to do with a righteous world. They want nothing to do with turning the other cheek and giving away a second coat to the poor. They want nothing to do with praying for the enemy and practicing purity of heart. They know Jesus and hate him. That's what make them demons. And this poor man is filled with demons. Why, he is called "Legion," he has so many demons within him.

The connection between demonic possession, with its love of sin and hatred of Jesus, and death, loneliness, and graveyards is powerfully and pitifully put in this Gospel story. Legion is filled

by spirits that love sin, and *therefore* he is lonely, poor, and consigned to deserts and graveyards. In Legion, we see the haunting consequences of sin.

St. Augustine taught that reality is connected with virtue. He would have us picture reality as a ladder, with fullness of life at the top with God and sheer darkness of nothingness at the bottom. Sin, then, is any movement downward, away from God, toward nothingness.

Bruce Springfield once sang a song about “fading away.” “I don’t want to fade away. I don’t want to fade away,” he laments. In St. Augustine’s terms, this is the same thing as singing, “I don’t want to go on in sin. I don’t want to continue with wickedness.”

So taught Augustine. We make ourselves shadowy and insubstantial through our sins.

But the saint did not invent this notion. He took it from the Bible, including this morning’s story about poor Legion. Legion is demon-possessed. Legion is filled with forces that incline him toward sin. And therefore he is alone, living among the tombs. Legion is powerfully drawn toward sin, and therefore he has become ghost-like – almost forgotten by society, except for those times when they can lay their hands on him and attempt to bind him in chains.

To this poor man Legion, two words of Gospel can be spoken. First, Legion is wrong when he fears that Jesus will torment him. And second, no matter how strong his demon-possession, Jesus is stronger still. Let’s consider these two points.

When Legion sees Jesus, he lets out a howl:

<sup>28</sup>When he saw Jesus, he cried out and fell down before him, and said with a loud voice, “What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I beseech you, do not **TORMENT** me.”

But Jesus does not torment us. Let us get this straight. Tormenting is not in our Lord’s nature nor the effect in our lives of his presence in our hearts. Jesus does not torment us, but saves us. He does not deplete life, but increases it. He does not make us melancholy, but gives us a chance for happiness at last:

<sup>28</sup>Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. <sup>29</sup>Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls. (Matt 11:28-29)

The bitter error of the demons and of the demon-possessed is that they suppose that life with Jesus means misery, when it means abundance:

<sup>10</sup>The thief cometh not, but for to steal, and to kill, and to destroy: I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly. (John 10:10)

What pathos to hear Legion speak of “torment”? What greater torment can he suffer than he already suffers, filled with those demons, alone among the tombs?

And so it is for you and me, with both our great sins and our little ones. We imagine that if we give them up, life will be poorer. But are we really so very happy with them in the first place? Would not it be better to be respected by our neighbors? Would it not be better for them to know that our word is trustworthy, that no drunkenness nor lust nor lazy self-indulgence is ever going to shake us from our word – that when we say we will do something, others can count on it, like money in the bank?

Would it not be better to look both God and our neighbors in the eye and to not feel so awful ashamed!

Would it not be better to be among friends and with the ability to take care of those entrusted to us, rather than to be continually swept along by sin and vice, like some rag doll shaken by a dog back and forth?

Would it not be better to feel that we are growing stronger? That we are increasing in virtue? That we are bearing the name of Christ with more integrity?

Would it not be better to lay our heads down on the pillow at night knowing that if we should die that night, at least we will be departing this world with the honor and affection of the world we know, however large or little that world

be?

I was fascinated to read an article in the *Washington Post* yesterday about the Netherlands<sup>1</sup>—how the Dutch have peeked their heads up, surveyed their anything-goes society, and find themselves appalled by what they have created. They legalized prostitution, for example. They thought it was a matter of women’s rights. Now they survey their society and find themselves sick at heart. They no longer view prostitution as a matter of women’s rights, but of women’s exploitation, as the Church and most of humanity has considered it through the ages. Their drugs, their prostitution, their profits off the vice of Europeans hastening into Amsterdam to have fun—these things have not increased life among them, but depleted it and cheapened it.

No, Jesus is not the one who torments us. Sin is the great tormenter, not Jesus.

And my other word of encouragement for Legion is this: Let there be a multitude of demons within Legion or within any of us. Still, Jesus is stronger than them!

Rejoice in the contrast between Legion at the start of the story and Legion at the end. As the story begins, Legion is a haunted, lonely, suffering man. He is naked. He lives among the tombs. He is filled with demons, and is unwelcome by his neighbors. They are probably frightened and dismayed by the man. But at the end of the story, we see a changed man—a model for us of the sanctified life. The demons have left the man—left him in peace. The townsfolk go out to the tombs to see what has happened, and behold!

<sup>35</sup>Then people went out to see what had happened, and they came to Jesus, and found the man from whom the demons had gone, sitting at the feet of Jesus, clothed and in his right mind...(Luke

8:35)

What is the difference? Jesus is the difference. And this same Jesus who rid Legion of his many demons, can rid us too of our demons and our habits of sin.

Remember the great third verse of Luther’s hymn *A Mighty Fortress Is Our God*. It speaks of “hoards of devils,” as if, in the strength of the Lord, to say, Bring ‘em on!

Though hordes of devils fill the land  
All threat’ning to devour us,  
We tremble not, unmoved we stand;  
They cannot overpower us.  
Let this world’s tyrant rage;  
In battle we’ll engage!  
His might is doomed to fail;  
God’s judgment must prevail!  
One little word subdues him.  
(*A Mighty Fortress Is Our God*, LBW 229)

In the days of Legion, Jesus entered into mighty combat with the demons, and he won. This same Jesus is present now in this church and in this Blessed Sacrament. As you come forward to him now for Holy Communion, consider him to be speaking a promise to you—a promise that he seals with his body and his blood. The promise goes something like this: When you are ready, you may conquer your demons. You may conquer those ways of life that have harmed you so and harmed those people entrusted to you. You have a blessed freedom to accomplish this because Jesus lives to walk with you and to clear the way for you all the way to victory.

To this Conqueror of Sin, Death, and the Devil be the glory, along with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/06/22/AR2007062202015.html?referrer=email>