

Calming the Storms

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When evening had come, Jesus said to his disciples, "Let us go across to the other side." And leaving the crowd behind, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was. Other boats were with him. A great windstorm arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped. But he was in the stern, asleep on the cushion; and they woke him up and said to him, "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?" He woke up and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, "Peace! Be still!" Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm. He said to them, "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?" And they were filled with great awe and said to one another, "Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?" They came to the other side of the sea, to the country of the Gerasenes. And when he had stepped out of the boat, immediately a man out of the tombs with an unclean spirit met him. He lived among the tombs; and no one could restrain him any more, 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. When he saw Jesus from a distance, he ran and bowed down before him; and he shouted at the top of his voice, "What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I adjure you by God, do not torment me." For he had said to him, "Come out of the man, you unclean spirit!" Then Jesus asked him, "What is your name?" He replied, "My name is Legion; for we are many." He begged him earnestly not to send them out of the country. Now there on the hillside a great herd of swine was feeding; and the unclean spirits begged him, "Send us into the swine; let us enter them." So he gave them permission. And the unclean spirits came out and entered the swine; and the herd, numbering about two thousand, rushed down the steep bank into the sea, and were drowned in the sea. The swineherds ran off and told it in the city and in the country. Then people came to see what it was that had happened. They came to Jesus and saw the demoniac sitting there, clothed and in his right mind, the very man who had had the legion; and they were afraid. Those who had seen what had happened to the demoniac and to the swine reported it. Then they began to beg Jesus to leave their neighborhood. As he was getting into the boat, the man who had been possessed by demons begged him that he might be with him. But Jesus refused, and said to him, "Go home to your friends, and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and what mercy he has shown you." And he went away and began to proclaim in the Decapolis how much Jesus had done for him; and everyone was amazed. Mark 4:35-5:20

I once heard of an Episcopal seminary dean who said that the whole Bible, from beginning to end, can be summarized in five words: *I'm God, and you're not.*

We can see this realization dawning on the disciples of Jesus in the gospel we just heard. They have been in a boat with Jesus at night, crossing a lake they'd known their whole lives. Storms on the lake could be life-threatening. The disciples knew this. They would have known the stories of others who hadn't gauged a storm's threat until it was too late.

Jesus was sleeping through this particular life-threatening storm. Seeing his rest, the reader begins to sense a distinction in the story between divine and human perspectives, but his disciples are not yet in a contemplative mood. They wake him in alarm: "*Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?*" Many of us have sounded that same alarm, when the life-threatening storm has come our way.

Jesus 'woke up and rebuked the wind. He said to the sea, "Peace! Be still!" Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm.' Here is the I'm God and you're not moment. The question that Jesus asks the disciples may be familiar from prayers that arise from our own storms: "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?" And they were filled with great awe and said to one another, 'Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?'"

A violent storm of a different sort is buffeting another soul in the second story from today's gospel. The storm is not on the sea but within him, a chaos of voices and forces by which he's become isolated and humiliated.

We may prefer to steer around a text that features demons and exorcism, but if I'm not mistaken this story is the single longest unified scene in the gospel of Mark, apart from the crucifixion. The baptism of Jesus is covered in only three verses. The Transfiguration gets seven verses. This uninterrupted scene is 19 verses. The author apparently thought this story was important and deserved the reader's attention.

Maybe we are being invited here to see how we, like the man, can also be Legion, that is, held captive, confused and compromised by so many voices, decisions, impulses, distractions, fears and judgments:

Did I like the opening hymn?

And why are they using the free-standing altar?

And will the preacher mention Juneteenth, the newest national holiday, observed for the first time this past Friday?

And, in any case, when did I last have a new idea or a new friend that crossed lines of race or culture or privilege and poverty?

Will I ever be able to afford a home in this crazy housing market?

Will I even live that long? Maybe the new Delta variant will get me. I wonder what the vaccine hoaxers are thinking now.

Did I say too much? What did he think of me? Does it matter? Do I care?

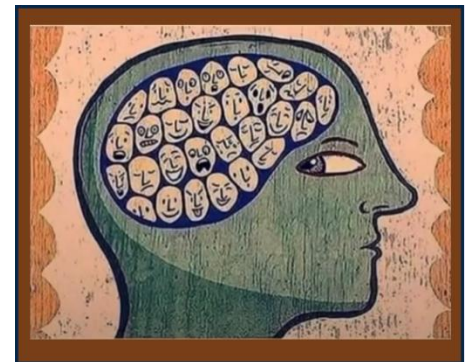
Do I like my job? How did I end up here, anyway? I should have been an artist – no, I mean a dentist! But my mother said I had a bad smile.

It's awful being the middle child.

I wonder if the nectarines on the kitchen counter have ripened.

And when is this preacher is going to stop?

"My name is Legion; for we are many."



The man does not so name himself until the middle of the story, when Jesus asks his name. Earlier we learned that the man was unable to be restrained. His torment was so strong that 'no one had the strength to subdue him.' Naturally we want to keep our distance. But is he not also us? Do we not also know the voices that defy wisdom and love and loyalty and hijack our best intentions and our most sacred allegiances?

Just last night I saw a heartbreaking scene in a TV drama – a group of professionals gathered for an intervention with an addicted colleague. The woman, a skilled neurosurgeon when sane and sober, is parading around the circle, shouting louder and louder:

“What do we want? Drugs! When do we want ‘em? Now!”

“What do we want? Drugs! When do we want ‘em? Now!”

"My name is Legion; for we are many."

What are the voices and impulses, I wonder, that derail and derange and damage you or me and those we live and work or live with and love?

Notice that the first thing we learn about the man in the gospel story is that he *‘lived among the tombs’*, which is where we live, or where we have died, or where we continue to be the living dead, no longer able to navigate all of our competing and crazy stormy inner characters.

Jesus now demonstrates in the life of this one ravaged soul an *I’m God, and you’re not* authority that I pray is familiar to many of us when we have been unraveling among the tombs. I’ll mainly leave aside the drama of the 2000 swine drowned in the sea – let’s think of them for now as the appalling collateral damage to which the man in the story or we may have been party. Let’s skip ahead to the point of view of the ‘townspeople.’ They *“came to Jesus and saw the demoniac sitting there, clothed and in his right mind, the very man who had had the legion.”*

Clothed and in my right mind is a feeling I myself know, when I recognize that Christ is there on my troubled shore, ready to help, already speaking a word that will calm the chaos and restore the lifesaving divine voice that can clothe us with hope, courage and love. I hope and pray you also know that eternal voice and gift.

We may now see how these two stories in today’s gospel are the same story. To oversimplify, we could say that one storm is environmental, while the other is mental. In both cases Jesus calms the storm. He is manifesting his divine nature, revealing the One who wants us to know that *I’m God and you’re not*. To the prideful it may sound like a put-down or a threat. But if you’ve been engulfed by a storm that Christ has calmed, you’ll know that it’s good news. *Amen.*