

There you have it—the first reported case of” deviled ham” ☺

We don’t know *why* Jesus decided to go there—across the sea to the other side... to an area that was largely Gentile territory—but he does.

As he and his disciples head across, a major windstorm suddenly sweeps down the lake, filling the boat with water. In fear, the disciples wake Jesus up; and with a simple word, Jesus rebukes the wind and the raging waves... and they cease; there is a calm. [That is the story right before our story.]

Then, when they arrive at the country of the Gerasenes, they are met by another “storm”—this time, in human form. This man, possessed by demons, immediately confronts Jesus and fills the air with screaming / yelling. [The disciples must have wanted to get straight back in their boat and head for home!]

He is a “*man of the city*” (we are told)—in other words, a man who used to live and work with the other town’s folk. From the description Luke gives us, we can see just how far this man has fallen: he wears no clothes... his home is now among the tombs... he lives in shackles / chains... he is alone. But these signs are just symptoms of an even deeper loss—the loss of his very self... life. Simply put, life for him has become a way of death.

When Jesus addresses him, asking his name, we don’t even hear the man speak; instead, it is the unclean spirit that responds with the name “Legion.” This man no longer has a name of his own / an identity of his own. He is defined by his “condition”... by what he’s captive to / by the forces that “occupy” / possess him. All that is left is a boiling struggle of conflicting forces—too many demons to count. It was as though a Roman legion (5000-6000 strong) is at war within him.

This man has lost everything. He has been driven away from his home/ family—everyone and everything dear to him. He has lost his community... his dignity... his very self / his life..

Those who once knew him as a beloved family member, neighbor, or friend... now know him as a menace to society—someone to be controlled / guarded... bound and shackled... kept *safely* “outside” the community.

The unclean spirit—the legion of demons—addresses Jesus directly. “*Who are you to me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God?*”

Isn’t it interesting?! The demons *know* who Jesus is... and they seem to *know* Jesus’ power. Sure, the demons are powerful—dangerously powerful! But their plea to Jesus, “*do not torment me*”... “*do not order us to go back into the abyss*” (the place where disobedient spirits were imprisoned)... shows that they know that he is even more powerful.

They *know* they cannot resist the power of Jesus’ command. They *know* that Jesus is more powerful than even their great “legion” of powers.

With a word of permission, Jesus casts out the demons (into the herd of swine, as they requested... and they run down a steep bank into the water and are drowned)... and the man is set free / healed!

Good news, right?! Wouldn’t you expect “*all the people of the surrounding country*” to rejoice and give thanks for the “release” of this man (one of their own) held captive for so long by these dark forces? Wouldn’t you expect a response of clear, uncontrollable joy at the arrival of a power greater than evil?!

Luke tells us, they “*asked [Jesus] to depart from them; for they were seized with great fear.*”

Rather than hearing of Jesus' power and praising God for the man's return to life among them, they hurry Jesus back to his boat, and they ask—*no*, they pretty much demand—that Jesus leave them. Why? What do you suppose they were so afraid of?

Before Jesus' arrival, **the people knew** where the evil power dwelt—in this unnamed / tormented man. **They knew** where this man lived... and they devoted considerable time and effort and expense trying to “protect” or guard him / control him (even to the point of shackling / chaining him). **They were used to** “Legion”—he had become a part of the order of their world. [Perhaps this shows the extents to which a community can learn to “live with”... even accommodate evil / destructive forces in their midst.]

But now, because of Jesus, things have changed. The power of God for good / for life has come into their community... and it disrupts the way of life they have come to know / accept. “*Better to deal with the powers we know than the power we don't know...*” right?!

Even when it is for good, power that can neither be predicted nor controlled is frightening.

- If Jesus can do this to Legion, what will he do to us?
- What will he do next in our community? How will it affect us?
- Do we even want to find out?

Sadly, we humans are, too often, unwilling to do the very things that will bring positive change / wholeness / health to our lives. We would rather keep our old demons than upset the status quo / change our lives.

One of the first things I learned as a counselor is that you can only bring a person so far... a point always comes when decisions / changes / “course corrections” (small or large) need to be made. The sad truth is that many individuals come up to that point... and then turn away from the source of healing / return to the “demons” they know.

Why? Because they are afraid... because the “cost” seems too high... because what lies ahead for them is “unknown” and scary. As terrible / destructive as their “demons” might be, the familiarity of them is “comfortable.” In spite of their misery / captivity, they refuse to change or to let go of their often harmful / self-destructive ways.

We sometimes see this phenomenon at work in congregations, as well. They say they want to grow or change... yet they cling, for dear life, to the old ways that they know / are “comfortable” / that keep them “stuck” where they are – never dealing with the “demons” of their past or present... continuing in the same old, unhealthy patterns that have brought them to this point. Is this true of us / St. Paul's?

Today's story is about more than a healing / exorcism of a man. It is, at the core, about the will and power of God—for transformation / for life!

What makes people resist the good news of the gospel / God's active presence in their lives... is the fact that it will quite possibly change everything!

As C.S. Lewis once wrote, “*sometimes we think that letting the Holy Spirit into our hearts is like having an interior decorator come in and put up a set of new drapes here, throw a fresh coat of paint there, and just generally spruce things up a bit. But in reality, once the Spirit comes in, the next thing you know, it's knocking out walls, tearing up floorboards, and just generally refashioning the whole place.*” That can be scary... unsettling...

We can get so used to / so “comfortable” with the patterns of our lives / what we know—including the “demons” of our past / present / the power of evil at work in the world around us (those things that hold us back / prevent us from becoming what God intends us to be)—that we resign ourselves to them.

Moving in a new direction... into a “new reality” / an “unknown future” can be frightening—even when the change is for the good... and it comes from God... and it promises to bring new life / wholeness with it.

After all of this, I guess it really is no surprise that this man wants to jump into the boat and go with Jesus and his disciples... to make a fresh start. Look at his options: 1) Go with Jesus—the one who wasn’t afraid to come near him... the one who set him free / healed him / gave him his life back... or... 2) Stay with those who know him only as “Legion”... and who seem upset that he’s now free of the demons that held him captive for so long.

He’s ready to follow Jesus. There is room in the boat, and he’ll gladly leave without looking back. But Jesus says, “Stay.” “Go back to your home and tell everyone how much God has done for you.” The townspeople chased Jesus away... but the healed man stayed... and, according to vs. 39, he kept on telling people how much Jesus had done for him.

Something about his ongoing witness reminds us that this is our role too—for we all know lots of people in this world / in our community / perhaps even in our own families who have tried to chase Jesus away.

Our calling is to return to our “homes” (where we live / work... to the people who know us well)... and keep telling what Jesus has done / is doing for us... keep telling about the power of God that sets us free from the powers that hold us captive / the powers that seek to destroy / take away the life that God intends.

- What has God done for you? What is your testimony of God’s power at work in your life?
- How / where is God at work... bringing transformation / new life to you and your loved ones? How can you share that with others?

Who is this person, Jesus? That is the question that is being addressed as we move deeper into Luke’s gospel. This is what we know so far:

- He is the one who restores life to the dead.
- He is the one who graciously welcomes and forgives sinners.
- He is the one who, by a word, can control the powers of nature (wind / water).
- He is the one who has power over even the forces of evil (demons / unclean spirits)—over all those powers that attempt to possess us / take life away from us.
- He is the one who came and who continues to come: to cast out fear... to bring an end to suffering... to set us free from whatever holds us captive... to bring new life.
- He is the one who restores our identity—our God-given identity—and reminds us just how much God loves us!

Jesus’ word of promise to us, through stories like this, is: *“I have come to set you free—free from all that holds you captive... from all that threatens to destroy the life I intend for you. Listen to my word. Believe my word. My word has power to unshackle... to heal and to give life... even in the midst of this world where evil and good continue to battle.”*

Thanks be to God! Amen.