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June 23, 2019
The Second Sunday after Pentecost

Luke 8:26-39
Isaiah 65:1-9
Psalm 22:19-28
Galatians 3:23-29

Every time I read our Gospel story for today I think - that would make the perfect horror movie. A legion of demons, a possessed man living in a graveyard, a herd of crazy animals, and townspeople afraid for their lives. It's a great plot.

I love scary movies. I'm not talking about the blood and guts kind of horror movies, and especially not the kind that have a chain saw carrying masked man. Those movies don't interest me in the least. What I do like, however, are the nail-biters. The movies that keep you on the edge of your seat. The psychological thrillers that are a moral commentary on what binds us, of the things that hold us captive and lead us down dark, metaphorical paths. These are the kinds of horror movies that make us think about who we are and who we want to be. The kinds of movies that at first glance may seem like your standard thriller but after watching, you step back, and realize that the layers of meaning are quite profound.

For instance, we watched the movie *Us* the other night. The latest thriller by director Jordan Peele (who also directed *Get Out*). In *Us*, a family of four are confronted by their "evil" doppelgängers...another family of four that looks exactly like them. The only problem is that the duplicate family wants to kill the real family, to take their lives and make them their own.

But there is something amiss – this other family, you soon realize, is limited in their capacity to communicate. They are stunted – not fully human, lacking the characteristics that define us as evolved human beings. Things like verbal articulation, social skills, normal movement (those are the visible, external limitations). Then there are the internal, emotional limitations – things like compassion, understanding, and kindness.

As you start to unpack the plot, you realize that the real tension in the movie isn't about a physical struggle between these families. It's a symbolic struggle within themselves. The struggle of our deeper nature, of who we want to be, of our values, of our desires. You might say it's the shadow side of ourselves coming to haunt us. Ultimately, *Us* is a story about which values will win out in the end.

And so I was intrigued at the parallels with our Gospel. Here is this man, Legion, who has been possessed by 6,000 demons. He lives alone, naked, among tombstones. An outcast of society, thrown away, ignored. He has become worthless in the eyes of the town. This man literally lives in the shadows.

On the opposing side are the townspeople. They have built for themselves a system of safety and acceptability. Things are ordered and predictable. But when Jesus comes along and heals the possessed man, the people become afraid. They order Jesus to leave wanting nothing to do with the healing or this redeemed man. For them, they have decided to live in the shadows of their own ignorance and fear.

It's a fascinating tension between good and evil, of our best intentions and our worst inclinations. And you are left wondering which side will win in the end. And I would argue that the Gospel story even pushes us to consider our own shadow sides and ask ourselves what is pulling us towards darkness and what is pushing us towards the light. What harms us and what redeems us?

Here is the trap...as Rev. Evan Garner wrote in a commentary in *Christian Century* for this week, "*Sometimes the terror we know is more tolerable than the peace we cannot imagine.*"

The townspeople in Luke are so deeply gripped by terror that they can't move and so they prefer to stay there, unable to look at the redeemed man, pushing Jesus away, returning to the way things were, unwilling to accept the change that was right in front of them. Their shadow sides win out. They can't imagine the peace that is available to them and so they tolerate the terror.

Then...there is Legion. A man who was so broken, so fallen into his demons that he had given up his own name. He had become known only by his demons. He lived an intolerable life and had by all accounts given up and everyone had given up on him. But...as in any good thriller, there is always a spark of hope. The man sees Jesus and something within him knows there is more to this life than misery and pain.

And in a moment of pure will he calls out to Jesus, "What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High?" Jesus sees the man and asks simply, "What is your name?" The man is seen for the first time, the light expands, the hope grows.

In a dramatic act, the climax of the story, Jesus casts out the demons, sends them into a herd of pigs which then rush into the lake and drown. I can't help but imagine the moment when the possessed man is healed, when he sees the herd take his burden and destroy it. It's the moment the shadows are overcome. When the unlikely hero emerges from the rubble.

But you know the fight isn't quite over. You know that the shadows will continue to lurk. And, they do. The townspeople seized by fear send Jesus away. And in a final suspense filled moment, the restored man asks to go with Jesus but Jesus refuses. He tells the man to return home and declare how much God has done for him. In other words, you have much work to do. The shadows will continue to haunt the people but you have to have the strength to maintain hope, to fight for good, to hold on to what is true. If it was a

cinematic ending, we would see the man standing at the edge of town with the sun setting in the background as he squares his shoulders ready to take on the next challenge.

But our lives don't come with a cinematic ending complete with good lighting and a powerful soundtrack.

Our lives, our demons, our challenges are a bit more real. So let's go back to our quote, *"Sometimes the terror we know is more tolerable than the peace we cannot imagine."* The story of Legion asks us to reflect on this very notion. What terror is holding you back? What are you afraid to face in your own life? Where do you need liberation so that your soul can be free?

The story of Legion is a charge – a charge to rise above the shadows and boldly call to Jesus, "What have you to do with me?" Take me and free me. Rebuild and remake me. God, take these demons and release me. I don't want to be afraid anymore.

Folks, I could give you a long list of what those demons might be. From drugs, to depression; from abuse, to loneliness; from hate, to anger. You know what you battle. You know your shadow side. The story of Legion reminds us that there is always hope for redemption. So have courage. Call out to God. And like Legion, claim freedom. Amen.