

What are you doing here?

Each of the two scriptures read this morning, as different as they are, contain one central question which also applies to us. How do we understand who we are and what is the meaning of our lives? Although that may sound like two questions, understanding who we are usually is how we define the meaning of our life. In the 1st Kings passage Elijah flees for his life, asking God to take away his life, then God repeatedly asks Elijah the question I used as a sermon title; while Luke begins his narration of this encounter with the demons asking Jesus why he is approaching them as Jesus responds by initially ignoring them and asking the man his name. Elijah has just won a major victory over the priest of Baal who vastly outnumbered him with his demonstration of the power of God to answer his prayer. The gathered people then proclaim that Yahweh is their God, the drought is broken and the vanquished priests are killed. Elijah seems to be a role, but the celebration doesn't last. When Ahab reports to his queen, Jezebel what has happened, she is beyond furious. She is the one who brought the worship of Baal to Israel and is extremely loyal to his worship. She vows that Elijah will be killed by the next day. Instead of being confident in God's power and purpose for his life, Elijah becomes fearful and flees. The narrative tells us he fled to Beer-sheba which lay outside the boundary of Israel taking him out of the region Ahab and Jezebel controlled. But even that did not make him feel safe, so he continued into the wilderness another day before resting. He has traveled a distance of around 100 miles...since this was on foot, it is easy to see just how frightened he was for his life. When he finally stops to rest, he asks God to "take away his life." In this moment he feels his life has been futile and wants out, he feels helpless: indicating what he has done is enough to endure before falling asleep. As he is resting, an angel comes bringing nourishment and to awaken him so that he eats what is provided. He rests and eats what is provided for his nourishment twice more as the angel tells him he would need to prepare for the journey he will make. When Elijah resumes his journey it is to go forty days and nights into the wilderness until he reaches Horeb, also known as Sinai, and by both names is called the Mount of God. There he takes shelter in a cave for the night. After the night the word of the Lord came to him—not in a dream, nor through an angel. This is known as a theophany or an appearance of God to humanity, but few of these manifestations occur outside of dreams, visions or outside the agency of an angel. Elijah, like Moses, speaks directly with God at this time. Moses also asked the Lord to die, but the request was not answered directly. It is clear that although God did not respond to Elijah's request other than provide provisions; perhaps that is an important factor. God provide what Elijah needed to go on. God did not then challenge Elijah's wish to give up, or berate him, but instead nourished him so that he could continue. Now, in the shelter of the cave, God is ready to respond but certainly not in the way Elijah wants. What Elijah hears is God's voice asking him, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" Probably Elijah thinks God should already know, but he responds by uttering a list of complaints that show his mind set: He states his achievements in trying to get the people to turn away from Baal, he has been zealous in this endeavor. He complains about the people breaking their covenant with God and overturning Yahweh's altars and killing other prophets of God. He feels very alone and frightened because "they are wanting to take my life away." He evidently no longer wants God to let him just die. The voice tells him to go outside and wait because the "Lord is about to pass by." Again, there is a comparison to Moses who stood in a cave while the

Lord passed by. What happens then is a dramatic and noisy time with a great wind which broke rocks off the mountain, an earthquake, and a fire. But the Lord was not in those things. Next is described a “sound of sheer silence.” Exactly what sheer silence describes is not clear—the Hebrew words indicate silence and stillness—but whatever it is, after all the other things the silence was probably, ironically loud. However it is described, what it did was grab Elijah’s attention as he hears again that same question: “Elijah, what are you doing here?” Elijah’s response is actually no different, uttering the same complaints. God pretty much ignores them and then gives Elijah a mission—to go back because God had more work for him to do. Elijah’s encounter with God has given him, not only physical nourishment, but also emotional and spiritual nourishment. He has found God present and faithful even during his fear and flight. Elijah becomes ready again to serve the Lord. He then leaves the wilderness and goes back to Israel as instructed. Elijah’s fear of Jezebel is no longer dominant; he is no longer despondent. He has faced his demons and returns to his faithful service as God’s prophet. Notice I called Elijah’s fear, his hopelessness, and his despondency demons. That is the connecting point to our gospel text. When the Luke text opens Jesus has just calmed the seas with his voice, leaving the disciples to wonder “Who is this?” Now Jesus has directed them to go to the country of the Gerasenes which is on the opposite shore of the Sea of Galilee. This land is inhabited by gentiles which accounts for the herd of pigs which show up later in the narration. As Jesus steps out of the boat he is accosted by the demons who have taken possession of an unnamed man. The life of this man is described in horrific terms; he had no home but lived in the tombs; he had been without clothes for a long time. Even before the demons speak Jesus has been commanded then to come out of the man. Even though the disciples do not yet recognize Jesus’ identity; the demons recognize Jesus and his authority as the Son of God. Accepting they must come out as commanded, they ask for mercy; “I beg you, do not torment me.” Demons were considered to be contagious and able to move from host to host, so those believed demon possessed were isolated. The man has been kept under guard and bound with chains by the community because they feared the demons. However driven by the demons he would break the chains and go out into the wilderness. When Jesus asks the man his name, his response is “Legion.” Whether it is the man actually speaking or the demons, the man no longer has an identity apart from the demons who have possessed him. The identity response given is: “Legion”, for many demons had entered him.” Jesus grants the demons’ request to go into a herd of pigs rather than be forced back into the abyss. The demon possessed pigs then rushed down the steep bank into the water and drown. This story is one that people of our time have a difficult time accepting as we no longer believe in “unclean spirits” and “demons” as did the people of Jesus’ time. Yet we frequently speak of “being possessed by something” or of someone have a demon within them. So when we approach this story, where do we begin? We need to begin with the question Jesus asks: What is your name? Because this story is actually still our story. Remember that when Jesus asks this question the man is not coming to Jesus asking for healing, but to push him away: “What have you to do with me?” But Jesus isn’t pushed away. Instead Jesus asks for his name and begins to recall the man to himself. Jesus asks us the same thing...who are you really beneath the labels and the diagnoses, the pretense and the piety, the fear and the shame? Who are you when no one is looking? This story is our story because it tells us the unflinching truth about our condition. “Legion,” the man said in response to Jesus’ question. My name is Legion, a multitude, a vast host, an

incalculable swarm. Why? Because the text tells us “many demons” torment him. In other words, the sources of his brokenness are myriad. The assault on his mind, soul and body is multi-pronged; it comes from many sources braided together. Perhaps it doesn’t matter what approaches we choose to explain these “demons” existing in our world; whether through Biblical, theological, medical, sociological options, what we do know is that this condition strips one of agency, sanity, dignity, and community. It keeps one in isolation. It renders the person anonymous in the community and even to themselves. It encourages the mutilation and destruction of one’s own body. It deadens the soul and divides the mind. In short, the demons of our world deprive one of self-control and propel one toward self-destruction. The truth is that ails us as humans is Legion; the evil that haunts us has many faces, many names. We are all—every one of us—vulnerable to forces that seek to take us over, to bind our mouths, to take away our true names and to separate us from God and each other. Some of us suffer from depression or anxiety; some of us are addicted to sex, alcohol, some kind of drug, or even thinness. Some of us are slaves to the internet or games, or prone to bitterness, or caught up in cycles of dishonesty, or in love with our own righteousness. Some cannot shake traumatic past experiences; some have been abused; some are filled with jealousy; some are filled with hatred toward others...and that is just a few of the “demons” that inhabit our world and us. If we expand the definition of “possession” to include everything that conspires to keep us dead when God wants us alive and in community, then the story of the Gerasene demoniac is not an ancient oddity. It is in the air we breathe. It is the zeitgeist we inhabit. It is the pandemic of our time as we fear so much. That is the bad news. But it is not where the story ends. The story ends with the man “back in his right mind, clothed and sitting at the feet of Jesus. The story ends when we surrender to the one alone who has the power to cast out the horrors which torment us all. The healing, restoring, transformative power of Jesus which allows us to see ourselves as the beloved children of God is the true good news available to us to deal with any and all demons. Looking at these texts we have to acknowledge the world still looks dark. The demons in our world are legion. The vulnerable are exploited. Rulers and leaders abuse their power and the innocent suffer. It is enough to make you want to flee and hide; sometimes as if you like the unnamed man possessed by Legion chained to the tomb. Take heart. Angels appear in our lives just when we least expect them; just when we reach our limits. Sustenance comes when and how you least expect it. God speaks in a barely audible voice, a whisper. The least of these is lifted up and given divine commissioning showing the world God’s presence. The strongest of our demons cannot withstand the command of our God given through faith and the body of Christ. What is our name? Beloved child of God. What are we doing here? We are here to proclaim the word of God. To speak God’s truth of love to corrupt powers through actions of caring. We are to go where God sends us to tell our story of the transformative grace of the Lord because although once we were known as Legion, now you know you are a child of God and clothed by Christ. Thanks be to God.