

## A DEMONIAK NAMED LEGION

The story of Legion is really interesting. So interesting, in fact, that if you ever try to preach from this text, you get so wrapped up in all the details and different facets of the story that it is impossible to cover all the bases. At least that is my experience. What about the pigs? Why do they all drown? Can't pigs swim? Doesn't Jesus care about killing all these pigs? What about the SPCA, and how can the church justify its position in regard to this story in our time? (Truly a stupid question, but some people will do almost anything to distract themselves and others from the real issues.)

And what about Legion himself? Is he a schizophrenic? Can Jesus really heal a schizophrenic that fast? Why do the people of this village want Jesus to leave the area, when He has done something so wonderful? "Get out of town" seems like a strange reaction. And why has Jesus come to this region in the first place? Clearly it is not Jewish territory; Jews do not raise pigs.

So having one passage that is already too much to handle, I read to you two? As you know, I want to learn everything I can about Jesus. Some of what there is to know lies between the lines, and some lies behind the stories themselves. To discover this information, we have to change our focus. I might say "from trees – to forest," but that might not do it for some of you. There is a tendency, when there is any interest in Jesus in the first place, to try to understand Him one incident, one saying, one encounter at a time. I like that too. But sometimes we need to step back and consider the setting, the context, the political situation, the geography, the language. It all has a bearing.

I have been trying to tell you lately that Jesus does not live by some of the precepts and principles that nearly everybody associates with good Christian behavior. A few of you already know this, but most people do not. And even those of us who do are frequently sucked in by the culture all around us, until we forget that we are followers of Jesus and not of the culture all around us. Our stories are impacted by the settings and circumstances in which we live also.

I hope you are listening, and paying attention. Because whenever I try to talk about some of the less-noticed attributes and approaches of Jesus, some people jump to the conclusion that I am trying to paint Jesus in a negative light – that I am trying to say that Jesus is unloving, uncaring, or mean and stingy at heart. I seldom take such comments seriously; they seem to me to be ludicrous. Perhaps I jump too easily to the conclusion that those who accuse me of such things are merely reacting against having any of their assumptions questioned in the first place. In any case, I think the New Testament record puts it beyond question that Jesus was caring, loving, and concerned for us – and our lives and our futures – more than, and beyond, any other person who ever lived.

But for me it is essential to the story that Jesus is doing this in real life and in the real world. His story is not about theories; it is not a sequence of spiritual essays that go into pages and pages of eloquent musings. Jesus the man lives in a temporal world of limitations, surrounded by the shortages of time and space and money – just like we do. Jesus is surrounded by imperfect people with enormous potential, yet who have huge hang-ups, fears, and hatreds, and who are easily threatened and therefore very dangerous – dangerous to themselves and to each other. For me, this is an essential and necessary part of the story. Apart from this, Jesus would have no significant meaning for me. Jesus takes us way beyond this, but if He does not start here – where I can recognize my own struggles and limitations – then how can I follow Him?

In theory, you can love everybody. In real life here on earth, that is ridiculous. You can pretend, but that is only make-believe. I don't like religion based on make-believe. It leads people astray, and in the end it always hurts people more than it helps them. "Ye shall know the bullshit, and it will *not* set you free."

So I care about watching Jesus wrestling with the limitations, with real people, with real choices. Even Jesus lives in a broken world. He will not take Legion with Him back to Galilee. All are not invited! He does not want to heal the Canaanite woman's daughter. Jesus is often exclusive, not inclusive. Will we dare to notice? A Book of Rules will not always help us. Some see the Bible as a book of precepts and principles. That's better, but still it will not always help us. Jesus' WAY is a way of prayer. Listening and following the guidance of the Holy Spirit day by day, situation by situation, person by person – *that* is the Jesus WAY. It is

scary, imprecise, and often uncertain. That is part of the WAY. Why do we imagine Jesus was forty days in the wilderness or all night in prayer – over and over going apart, going on retreat, getting away from the crowds and the demands of His mission? Jesus knew it was essential for Him to keep getting back in tune, refocused – renewed in the presence and love of God. If we think we can be His followers without doing this ourselves, we are very sadly mistaken. As a result of our prayers, we do not always get to do what would look nice or loving to everybody around us. Is that important to know? Only if we are genuinely serious about following Jesus. A lot of people didn't think Jesus looked very good either. They didn't think He was doing it right or acting very religious. In fact, this was the opinion of most of the most religious. You have heard of the scribes and Pharisees?

Okay: So Jesus is not a good-hearted, simple-minded peasant with some special gifts who wanders about Galilee mouthing spiritual platitudes and healing various people as He goes. The single most amazing thing about Jesus is His utter obedience to the guidance He receives in prayer. Jesus is the walking, living demonstration of the Shema – the heart and core of Judaism: *“Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.”* (Deuteronomy 6:4-5) Many have said it. Many have thought it a good idea. Some have even demonstrated efforts and desires in this direction. Jesus is the quintessential embodiment of this precept. Jesus loves God – beyond anything and everyone else on earth. Beyond all other earthlings that we have ever known or heard about, Jesus is willing to say to God: “You want it – you got it.” (At least so far as my life is concerned.)

For that reason, Jesus has a laser-like quality about the way He lives; about what He does and does not do; about how He treats people; about what He decides to do and decides not to do. Part of the puzzlement about Jesus – part of the hard-to-grasp truth – is that we cannot pigeonhole Him: we cannot explain His Way by a set of rules or by any list of do's and don'ts. That is because Jesus is not living by the rules and He is not living by the Book. He is living by the guidance He is receiving in an ongoing relationship with God. I know; you get tired of hearing me say it. And I get tired of realizing how few serious Christian disciples know it.

*“You shall love the Lord your God”* – not just *words* about God, and not just *a book* about God. Of course, I believe that Jesus is trying to set up a WAY – a CHURCH, a FOLLOWING – which will follow Him into this very different approach to LIFE. In short, that those who call Jesus “King” and “Lord” will also live lives of prayer and will follow the guidance of the Holy Spirit – which, in Christian perspective, is the Holy Spirit of our Resurrected Lord. But it has never caught on, except in small pockets of followers here and there. Most of Christendom thinks it is far too dangerous to suggest that we should pay attention to our prayers. Prayers are only for begging favors from God, not for guiding or directing our lives. So in the main, Christendom has gone back to the rules – back to the structures and organizations of various religious establishments. And of course this results in the muting of true relationship. The Book takes precedence over the relationship. Do you want to make love, or do you want to read a book about making love? Lots of people prefer reading the book. It is not nearly as challenging, scary, or messy. And I didn’t just say “making sex,” though I’m glad that’s what you heard me say, because that also applies.

So in the main, even people who consider themselves Christians have insufficient time for a real relationship with God. We stay busy, no doubt about that. And we do many things, some of them pretty impressive – for humans. But how Jesus lives eludes us because we cannot imagine getting truly serious about eliminating everything from our lives that interferes with our obedience and allegiance to the God who loves us, guides us, directs us, and requests that we engage in various efforts, activities, and relationships that we cannot predict or control or choreograph ahead of time. If we truly mean and want to put God in charge, that changes everything.

Does Jesus know that the Gerasene demoniac will be waiting for Him when He sails off to the far side of the Sea of Galilee for a respite – a retreat – with His disciples? Does Jesus know that the Canaanite woman will be waiting for Him when He tries to get a little downtime off in the region of Tyre and Sidon?

I don’t think so. This is not a puppet show. If Jesus had known, He would not have bothered to go to either location in the first place. Though Jesus often goes apart to pray and spends nighttime hours in prayer, as we look at the larger story it seems clear that Jesus is often nearly desperate for more alone time – for more time to check His plans,

His assumptions, and His experiences to make sure He is still on track, still following God's guidance. That doesn't take just five minutes, in most cases. We have to get quiet enough, peaceful enough, open and willing enough – or we do not hear the guidance. It started with forty days, but it needs constant renewal, constant updating. Lots can happen, even in a single day, to throw us off course. And Jesus, whatever you have been taught, was a man. So it is imperative that Jesus is constantly turning back to His relationship with God for renewed vision, for renewed strength and support, for renewed reassurance that God is with Him and still loves Him.

What?! Even Jesus needs to remember that God loves Him? Who taught us to call God *Abba* – Daddy? All of this is imperative for us too. Yet most humans don't seem to know it. We are not as rigorous and disciplined in our prayer lives as Jesus was. Therefore our lives are not laser-like. They are the mayhem of cross-purposes, unfinished goals, mixed motives, and good intentions that very frequently we only half remember. They are filled with the confusion of trying to please too many people, too many gods, too many good ideas, too many assignments. We do not dare to listen to the Holy Spirit very fully or for very long, for surely the Spirit will start taking things away from us that we are not willing to let go of yet. After all, why should we travel light, with only the things we truly need, when we can carry huge and heavy packs on our backs, full of endless junk and trivia which nevertheless make us look like heroes of kindness, concern, and caring? Jesus just shakes His head and says, "Well, let me know if you ever really want my help."

Anyway, in the realms of theory, Jesus may love everybody. I presume so, and I believe God loves everybody. That does not mean God can help everybody – if they will not listen. "You can lead a horse to water ..." we used to say.

But in real life, under the guidance of God, Jesus did not demonstrate inclusivity when He walked among us. Jesus did not invite and accept everybody. Jesus did not look like or act like He loved everybody in the real-life circumstances and settings in which He found Himself. Do we pay attention to the realities around us, and pray for guidance about how to deal with them, respond to them, react in real time and for our real purpose? Jesus did!

And now, a brief interruption while I bring up our map.



Our two greatest limitations are time and space. A map reminds us of the limitations of space.

First, something so obvious nobody ever mentions it. Jesus does not try to minister to everybody everywhere. That may be His eventual purpose; we like to think so. But things have to start somewhere. So where does Jesus concentrate His ministry? He starts in Galilee. It is where He grew up, and it is also a place where many very devout Jews live. He starts in Galilee so that He will have a little time to develop His “mission” before the authorities become alarmed enough to try to shut Him down. He starts with the followers of John the Baptist who are willing to come with Him, now that John is dead. But these are the followers of John the Baptist who live in Galilee – not in Judea or Jerusalem. Jesus is not only the Son of God, as we say; He is also a thoughtful and gifted strategist. The fact is, Jesus outwitted all the Jewish leaders until showdown-time after Palm Sunday. And Palm Sunday was carefully planned and executed too.

A bit of background: The three sons of Herod the Great are Archelaus, Antipas, and Philip. I told you a bit about Archelaus last Sunday; he rules Samaria, Judea, and Idumea (the yellow area on our map). Herod Antipas rules Galilee (the area in green). Philip rules the territory from the Sea of Galilee north and east toward Damascus (the area in dark pink).

Jesus chooses Capernaum, on the north shore of the Sea of Galilee, as His headquarters. The Jordan River separates Galilee from the region ruled by Philip. Herod Antipas, who rules Galilee, is the one who had John the Baptist executed. Jesus steps into the leadership of John’s movement, and, if you are paying attention, you will notice that Herod pretty quickly sees Jesus as a probable troublemaker and begins thinking he should also kill Jesus.

Aside from being very beautiful, why does Jesus choose Capernaum? It is the closest town to the border – about a mile away. If Herod’s soldiers come, they will come from Tiberias, and they will be seen coming. In five minutes, Jesus can be over the border into Philip’s territory. Antipas and Philip are half-brothers but they do not love each other. Antipas, you remember, had married Herodias (Philip’s wife) – against all Jewish law, we might add. John the Baptist’s outspoken criticism of this outrage was the primary reason he was beheaded. (Possible confusion here between Josephus and Mark 6:17 and Matthew 14:3.)

Back to the point: If Jesus can make it into Philip's territory, he will be safe. Philip will not turn him over to Antipas. By the way, of the three sons of Herod the Great, Philip is the only treasure. Archelaus inherited all the cruelty and meanness of his father, but none of the gifts for leadership. Herod Antipas is a joke as a Jewish king. He has no religion that matters, and he governs by greed, lust, whim, and stupidity. Lots of us seem to follow him better than we follow Jesus. But let's not dwell on that.

Philip is very different. There are few Jews in his territory – mostly Greeks and Syrians. But Philip is a really good ruler who really cares about his people. And his people love him in return. He rules for thirty-seven years, and his people live in peace and prosperity. He built Caesarea Philippi and Bethsaida Julias, and we hear stories of justice and fair play instead of resentments about cruelty or greed. Philip is always accessible to his people. He is famous for it. And in one of those strange twists of life: Do you remember Salome, the daughter of Herodias, who danced so well that it cost John the Baptist his life? She became the wife of Philip. Philip lost the mother but got the daughter.

Anyway, when we read about Jesus being in Caesarea Philippi, Jesus is on retreat – way out of Jewish territory. Caesarea Philippi is far away from any place where Jesus can build His ministry and mission.

As an aside: I was in Israel when I heard a guide telling her crew that the most likely place for the Transfiguration was Mount Hermon, just north of Caesarea Philippi. This was where Peter had made his bold statement that Jesus was the Messiah, the Son of God. So she thought this was a good spot for the Transfiguration too. Except Jesus came down from the Mount of Transfiguration to a crowd, to healing, and back into all the challenges of His ministry. There weren't any crowds at the foot of Mount Hermon or in the vicinity of Caesarea Philippi. Up in the north of Philip's territory, Jesus was on vacation. (Try Mount Tabor for the Transfiguration.)

Where is the region of Tyre and Sidon? (The purple area on our map.) It is way out of Jewish territory – way out of a place where Jesus can build His ministry and mission. Clearly Jesus is on retreat, trying to get away for some peace and quiet.

Where does Jesus meet Legion? The eastern shore of the Sea of Galilee. This is not Jewish territory. There are no Jews in the village

nearby. There are no crowds of eager followers here. Hence, Jesus is trying once again to get away for prayer – for peace and quiet. For Jesus, R&R is not for playing golf or tennis, or to drink or dissipate. It is to pray. He wants and needs more time with *Abba*.

Back to business: What do we learn from the Canaanite woman? We like her because she is so caring for her daughter. And she will not be put off, even by Jesus. Instead of reacting to His severe insults, she cuts behind His words to her real purpose. And finally Jesus grants her the healing. Was He just too tired to care? Did He just want to shut her up and get on with it? Did even Jesus forget to pray? It's a long way to come to the region of Tyre and Sidon for nothing. But this woman has ruined Jesus' retreat. She has effectively destroyed His hopes for rest and renewal. But that's okay, He's the Son of God; who cares if He needs rest or renewal or re-creation.

So then we start to ask: Why is Jesus so mean and so uncaring in the first place?

This woman doesn't know about His need for downtime, for alone time. Wanting her daughter to be healed is all she cares about. It isn't fair for either one of them. That's the trouble with a broken world. Jesus will never run out of people who need healing. So does that mean He should never even try to find time to pray? And the woman loves her daughter. Is it fair to expect her to leave Jesus alone at the expense of her daughter's healing, just so Jesus can get some rest and restoration? I do a shuddering double take. This woman really believes in Jesus. But she doesn't care about Him. She knows Jesus has the authority and power to heal, but she doesn't care about Him personally. She cannot afford to. She loves her daughter too much to have any room left over for caring about Jesus. "We really believe in you, so it's okay that you have to die to wake us up to the love of God." I wonder how many of us believe in Jesus without caring about Him?

What will happen if Jesus grants this woman's request and heals her daughter? Jesus knows with certainty: News will spread like wildfire, and that will be the end of His retreat. She is not the only one in the world who loves her daughter; she is not the only one in the world who has needs. Hearing about the miracle, people will flock to Him. But Jesus does not have time or energy enough to start a whole new mission and ministry up in the region of Tyre and Sidon. This is not Jewish territory! This is not where Jesus can further His purpose or plans. It is not where

God has asked Him to serve. This is not a place where people know about the prophecies or the coming of a Messiah. Jesus cannot die on more than one cross, and He cannot develop an authentic ministry except in Galilee – and from there to Jerusalem.

Does this mean that God does not love the people of Tyre and Sidon? Some people are just itching to say so. They can hardly wait to make their brilliant, derogatory, smart-ass remarks about how stupid all of Christianity really is. But I suppose that also is to be expected in a broken world. Our truth is that God does love the people of Tyre and Sidon – and of Baghdad, Beijing, and Boston as well. But if God does not guide and protect Jesus in the fulfillment of His true mission and ministry – and if it does not evolve unto Pentecost and beyond – how and when can God reach the people of Tyre or Sidon? It's the kind of thing I think we do not ponder enough – as we spread all our efforts too thin to matter, and urgently encourage each other to demonstrate a love so diluted that it cannot transform others or ourselves. That is not God or God's Holy Spirit. That is Satan's shell game.

So Jesus heals the daughter, and runs. He cannot afford to get embroiled here. The healing costs Him the prayer time and the renewal time that He desperately needs and that He came to this region for in the first place. The healing is for only one person (well, two – the daughter and her mother). But it is no use staying in the region of Tyre and Sidon. The cat is out of the bag. If Jesus doesn't leave, the crowds will come for healing, but it will only lead to a false ministry. So Jesus might as well go home and get back to work! The very next verse tells us that this is exactly what He does. He is back in Galilee before the end of the following sentence.

We all like it that Jesus heals the woman's daughter. I suspect that we will go on liking it. But that's because we do not want to notice the real issues. Our hunger for everybody to be helped has not been solved or even addressed. There is no happy ending here. All the people who need Jesus in this region of Tyre and Sidon will be left abandoned and deserted, no matter how we want to cut it. Jesus has been chased out. But if He had not been chased out, He still would not have done any healing or preaching here. He would only have tried to get renewal and strength for the challenges He was facing back home.

And what of Legion? Legion begs to come with Jesus. All Christian wisdom and expectation to the contrary, Jesus refuses to let him come.

Legion is not Jewish. He would be of no use in Galilee or Jerusalem. He would probably turn out to be hopelessly dependent. Despite all attempts to whitewash the rejection with notions of how much good Legion may do in his own country, the fact is that Legion is turned away. The reality of the situation and the time and the circumstances require it; they lead to a clear rejection. The man cannot come. He would doubtless be obedient and grateful to a fault. He would have converted to Judaism, and he would have agreed to circumcision, etc. But Jesus turns him away. Whatever our musings, that is the bottom line.

So what do you expect will happen to the people that Legion tells the good news to? Do they know who Jesus is? Can they understand enough to start a church? Will they be respectful enough of the former demoniac to take Legion seriously in the first place? Does Legion know enough to start a legitimate church or synagogue of his own?

Legion, God love him, will probably be grateful all his days. And he will tell his story to anybody who will listen. How long will anybody listen? He is certainly far better off than he was before. But in some ways, it is a sad story. A faith with nowhere to put it. And of course we can imagine, with more than a little reason for doing so, that in the next realm, Jesus will make it up to him. But that is not ours to know or say.

Do any of you really imagine that you are less important to Jesus and His purpose than were Legion or the Canaanite woman or any of the other characters we know about? Can you really believe that the story does not go on – that Jesus no longer cares who believes in Him, or follows Him, or rejects Him, or betrays Him? Do we still carry on His ministry in gratitude and love, or do we somehow let the date on our calendars confuse us? If Jesus is the Messiah, when does that stop being true? If the Messiah is our Lord and Savior, when is it okay for us to be unresponsive, or too busy to care about what Jesus wants for us, or from us?

In any case, we cannot follow Jesus by trying to look good to the people around us. We cannot follow Jesus by merely reading the Book or following the guidelines of any institutional church. We can only follow Jesus by paying attention to His Holy Spirit who connects to us within.