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Confronting Legion

Mark 5:1-20

5 They came to the other side of the sea, to the country of the Gerasenes. ² And when he had stepped out of the boat, immediately a man out of the tombs with an unclean spirit met him. ³ He lived among the tombs; and no one could restrain him any more, even with a chain; ⁴ 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. ⁵ Night and day among the tombs and on the mountains he was always howling and bruising himself with stones. ⁶ When he saw Jesus from a distance, he ran and bowed down before him; ⁷ 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." ⁸ For he had said to him, "Come out of the man, you unclean spirit!" ⁹ Then Jesus asked him, "What is your name?" He replied, "My name is Legion; for we are many." ¹⁰ He begged him earnestly not to send them out of the country. ¹¹ Now there on the hillside a great herd of swine was feeding; ¹² and the unclean spirits begged him, "Send us into the swine; let us enter them." ¹³ 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.

*¹⁴ 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. ¹⁵ 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.** ¹⁶ Those who had seen what had happened to the demoniac and to the swine reported it. ¹⁷ Then they began to beg Jesus to leave their neighborhood. ¹⁸ As he was getting into the boat, the man who had been possessed by demons begged him that he might be with him. ¹⁹ 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." ²⁰ And he went away and began to proclaim in the Decapolis how much Jesus had done for him; and everyone was amazed.*

In this biblical account, the writer describes an encounter between Jesus and a man with unclean spirits who has been living in the tombs, tormented by the demons. They had chained him, forced him to live in the margins and isolated him in the tombs and caves. They could not keep him chained, the scripture says, they could not restrain him anymore, they could no longer control his actions and cries for help. This story reflects the nature or tendency of victimizing the afflicted, the tormented and the demonized, yet Jesus turns this upside down in his encounter with this man.

The Matthew gospel tells of this encounter being with two demon possessed men, while Mark and Luke only mention the one, most likely the strongest of the castaways, the uncontrollable. He may have been the leader who recognized the moment to rise up when he saw Jesus.

The story tells us that there was shouting and howling, and that the man (or men) injured themselves often. You see, I wonder what happened to these men. Where did the demons really come from? What were the factors that led to this? Could they have been things like extreme poverty, hunger, persecution, violence? All these factors alter the mental, physical and emotional state of those who suffer, often causing us to groan and even hurt ourselves to not have to think about the pain of an empty stomach or feel the pressure of the knee on our necks.

When the conditions under which one lives are threatening your very livelihood and wellbeing, you are driven to do things you would have never imagined. Things like 1)Fleeing from a country with your young children in hopes of a violence and persecution free future; or living three families in a two-bedroom apartment to make ends meet, to pay the medical collections bills, and save with the hope of someday being able to rent your own apartment, and more.

I wonder where the demons came from? Did someone stop to hear the story of those who were cast to the tombs, chained up to keep them contained, controlled and intimidated? Or were they just too different, too much work? We know what it's like, as a Latinx people to be rejected, marginalized, and forced to live in inhumane conditions. We have learned to live in the shadows for fear of deportation, we have learned to live with sickness for lack of access to resources for medical attention, we have learned to sing our children to sleep to drown out the sounds of hunger pain rumbling through the empty stomachs.

Someone decided one day that they couldn't deal with them anymore, lets get rid of them, let's lock them up in the tombs, let's put the children in cages....oops that must be another story. They tried to control him, they tried to chain him.....they marginalized him, rejected him, oppressed him like a foreigner in the land----he was a stranger to them that did not belong, a threat to their way of life.

But instead, he fought against what was happening, they would chain him up and he learned to break the chains and then protested against the injustice towards those forced to live in these conditions by shouting and howling, creating societal unrest.

So then, Where is Legion?

- Legion is in the systems of racial injustice and disparity.
- Legion is in the structures that benefit the powerful and privileged who oppress the most vulnerable, perpetuate hunger, and control that which is different
- Legion is in the broken immigration system that cages children and families for seeking a better future
- Legion is found in the politicians who don't, or won't fight for the "least of these" demanding equal access to resources, and quality of life for all

- Legion is in a structure that is willing to use the military to control a people who are too tired of police brutality and have organized to use their first amendment rights to demand justice

You see, **the threat of change is the greatest threat of all for the powerful and privileged.**
The evil spirits, these demons that torment also have names and they form part of Legion:

Poverty Hunger Lack of affordable housing Systemic Racism
Racial violence and oppression Persecution Racial Prejudice
Discrimination Police brutality against black and brown bodies Lack of Equity
A lack of LIBERTY AND JUSTICE for ALL

Migrants, children, the elderly, the most vulnerable, the disempowered by the broken and unjust systems,

They are tormented day and night in our country, and across the globe, and they cry out in loud and often uncontrollable voices

“WHY ARE YOU TORMENTING ME?”

With the sound of thunder rolling from the cries of an empty stomach they call out “dando voces en el desierto” “howling day and night from the tombs and the mountaintops”

We cry out in the streets, in the schools, in the church, in congress, in our state capitols,
WE CRY OUT

Porque me atormentan? Why are you tormenting me?

I am hungry and I thirst for justice

Porque me atormentan? Why are you tormenting me?

I am afraid for my family and cannot return to my country for there is famine and violence

Porque me atormentan? Why are you tormenting me?

I only want what is promised for all- liberty and justice, a better life for my family, a life free of persecution and one of well being.

As the tormented ones in the region of the Gerasenes, we are also resilient, we are luchadores. We are BIPOC. We are immigrants and refugees. We are dreamers. We are families. We have power in our numbers, in our voices, and we are a great cloud of witness. It is time to howl and shout before the governmental and political structures that have silenced and oppressed us and

the most vulnerable for far too long. Jesus calls us to serve the least of these and has given us authority to do what is necessary to make justice happen.

Jesus saw the humanity in the one the community rejected and cast away. He didn't run from his appearance or his condition. He stopped, had compassion and gave him the attention he needed. HE DIDN'T QUESTION IF IT WAS ACCEPTABLE, if IT IS WAS CONVENIENT OR RIGHT, He JUST set him free and what about the pigs? A lesson was taught by Jesus to the members of this community that Human life is more valuable than possessions and property.

Jesus overpowered the injustice to bring justice for this man, and then told him to tell everyone what happened. Jesus not only set him free, he made sure the community saw it. Left him to live rightfully and with dignity in his community. Transformation was in the making; change was coming and this liberated man was going to be the movement leader for a better future.

Friends, TRANSFORMATION comes with JUSTICE, for JUSTICE produces change.

The people came and begged Jesus to leave. This will always happen for again, **the greatest threat to the powerful and privileged is CHANGE for it threatens their way of life.**

But the empowerment of an oppressed people is a force to reckon with.

God is a God of abundance and there is enough for all. Let us continue our work, raise our collective voice, HOWLING WITH LOUD AND UNSETTLING VOICES until this is the reality for every human being.

God empowers God's people, and God's people are called to empower others, as we answer our call to DO JUSTICE, LOVE MERCY AND WALK HUMBLY WITH GOD. (Micah 6:8)

Amen.