

Name that fear: Luke 8:26-39

by [Samuel Wells](#) in the [June 15, 2004](#) issue

Vacation time grips the imagination of Westerners. In Britain, it is now possible to buy an airline ticket on the Internet for a few pounds, then land in a European city for a “quick break” boosted by the elixir of novelty and the thrill of just being able to do it. A different language, a different currency, a different climate and adventures await. And why not? The best way to understand your own culture is to live in another.

Gerasa, however, is hardly a favorite holiday destination—in the first century or today. But in Luke’s Gospel it provides analogies, contrasts and perspectives on Israel. A man lives in dire straits; naked, among the dead. He recognizes Jesus, but sees him as a threat. Then Jesus asks him his name.

His name is Legion. This name is the key to the story. Everything begins to make sense when we allow the meaning of “legion” to dictate the shape of the story. It’s a story about Rome whose legions possessed Israel. Israel lived in internal exile. Why are there so many pigs, when Jews would have no use for pigs? Because pigs had one purpose only—to feed the bands of Roman recruits. As always, exegetes obsessed by Jewish custom or eschatological expectation or charismatic gifts or psychological states may miss the highly political significance of what the Gospel writer is recording. This is a coded identification of Jesus the liberator.

The passage retells the story of Jesus’ ministry. He arrives at the “far country”—far from his heavenly home. As he begins his ministry (“steps out on land”) he meets with conflict straightaway. Those who confront him are exiles from their true home. They find themselves unclean—defiled by death as Israel is defiled by gentile rule. And daily they have an impossible choice: confront Rome, and find that their shackles are fastened more tightly or that they are “driven into the wilds”; or allow the Romans to possess them, and lose their identity. Jesus faces the question of identity head on: “What is your name?” The man has lost his identity; he says, “My name is Rome.”

Drastic action is needed. Jesus delivers the people. The transformation is terrifying. Less fascinated by the sane and clothed state of the man, the people are horrified by the costs and consequences of the salvation Jesus brings. Fancy living without pigs! It's too scary. They ask Jesus to leave. The last scene of the story anticipates the last scene of the Gospel: just as later the disciples are "continually in the Temple, blessing God," so here the former demoniac proclaims throughout the city how much Jesus has done for him.

This is the kind of thing that happens when Jesus goes on holiday. The customs, adventures and challenges vary, but the holiday's real significance is in the way it recasts what is taking place at home. Before arriving, Jesus calms a storm, thereby allaying fears that the land of the gentiles is a land of deathly abomination. When he returns from Gerasa, he heals two women whose place in the unity of Israel (the number 12 is repeated) is blocked by the impurity of blood and death. On the other side of the lake a great drama is played out that mirrors, parodies and mimics the drama being played out in Israel. I have pointed out the similarities. But there is one key difference. On the far side of the lake, in Gerasa, many die so that one man can be saved. On this side of the lake, in Jerusalem, it is the other way round: one man is to die so that many can be saved.

As a pastor, I am invited from time to time to come to a person's home and hear stories about spirits, or demons, and to perform acts of cleansing or exorcism. I try always to go with an open mind. Looking back over these experiences, I sense a pattern. The people involved are often possessed by fear. The person of whom they are afraid is sometimes dead; sometimes it is their own self they fear; sometimes it is a person all too real, all too much alive and all too close—who yet can't be named. I see my role as listening to their fears until the point is reached when it is time for me to ask the equivalent of Jesus' question, "What is your name?" Sometimes I ask, "What is the worst thing that could happen?" in an effort to elicit a name for the possessing fear. My role is to restore in the person a true sense of his or her own power, and to witness to and offer appropriately the power given to the church through baptism and Eucharist, scripture and prayer.

But sometimes I sense I am dealing with a person who has internalized the crisis of a family, community or society. For such a person, empowerment is not enough. A whole range of relationships, habits and contexts are sick. Personal healing is not the issue, for the person is exhibiting the ills of a whole society—a whole world. The violent transformation of that world is portrayed in this story from Gerasa, the

country beyond the sea: many die to save one. But the ultimate transformation takes place on this side of the sea, in Jerusalem: one dies to save many.