

4th Sunday after Pentecost: CCSY, 20 June 2010

1 Ki 19:1-4, 8-15a; Gal 3:23-29; Lk 8:26-29

My name is Legion, for we are many

My name, He asks? I never know how to answer that question, nor indeed who it is that answers. Everyone around here knows me as 'Legion'; or, rather, that is the name by which they choose precisely *not* to know me. I am an outcast, unclean; a thing of shame, and fear; existing – if you can call it that – on the shadowy edges of their world, up on the hill among the tombs, in the place where the dead are found. It's not the shackles and they chains they have tried to bind me with that hold me here, so much as the fact that there is nowhere else for me to go, or be. And, in my world, without a home – without community – one might as well be numbered among the dead.

And yet, in many ways they are just like me, or I like them. 'Legion', as in a division of the soldiers of that empire which oppresses us all, equally – that 'strong man' who invades and possesses us: Rome, in this particular incarnation; but always someone, or something. And because we cannot seem to name or confront the powers that subjugate us, whatever their form – those things which prevent us from becoming our true and full selves – we submit, and drive the anger, the destructive impulses, inwards, wounding ourselves in the process, becoming – quite literally – mad. All of this, all of their hurts, are projected onto me; but we are as many as the things that beset us; and I am just like all of them.

Sometimes I feel like Elijah, driven out of the north country all the way to Beer-Sheba – about as far as one could get from Jezebel – because he dared to name the powers by which that regime ruled. Like him, I have wished that I could just lie down and die, because it feels so much easier than continuing this struggle. And, like Elijah – like Israel itself – I have wandered alone in this God-forsaken wilderness, waiting in caves for some sign of hope, or meaning: for the possibility of something other than this living death; this tormented body; this colonized mind. Even so, from where I stand, liberation looks a forlorn prospect.

But wasn't it also in a cave on Mount Horeb that Moses had his near miss with the Holy One? And in that ancient race memory – that foundational story – weren't the horses and riders of the tyrant cast into the sea?

He seemed unafraid of the abyss, of the darkness of my bone-filled cave; undaunted by the destructive forces which had taken hold of me in ways that would have been so visible, were they not removed from sight. No wonder He made them nervous. Such things must only be spoken of in whispers, or acted out in the private transcripts of our inner worlds. After all, what might happen if the lid was lifted on all of this pain? There would be consequences; things would need to change. As Moses discovered, liberty can be a dangerous and difficult thing.

It was a dying of sorts as all that rage was poured out at His feet. I'm sure Elijah knew something of the same experience as that still, small voice – the sound of sheer silence – absorbed the tempest that swirled within and around him: that all-consuming fire in his belly, which once held him fast in resignation, until it could be gently, and safely drawn out, and he could go on his way – one which was to prove a *new* way for Elijah, and for Israel.

No one else but He seemed able to face my naked need, to witness my vulnerability and brokenness, to bear with me and hold me – as only a lover might – until the shaking and the shuddering ceased, and all became still and strangely quiet...

What is to be my name now – now that I can no longer be identified as ‘Legion’, tagged by a label that reduces me to some manageable entity, like ‘Jew’ or ‘Greek’, ‘slave’ or ‘free’, ‘male’ and ‘female’? I’m sure you can think of some other such ‘boxes’ which serve to colonize and subdue the collective consciousness of your own culture: oppressing and repressing, keeping the lid on this volatile freedom, this otherwise uncontainable sense of identity-in-difference that we might have as God’s beloved children – as those who understand themselves, as though for the first time, in Him.

And it’s true; things couldn’t stay the same. They were angry with me then for a different reason: for the even more troubling possibility I came to represent. When they could no longer drive me away (and all that I once stood for), they begged *Him* to leave, much as the demons had done.

I wanted to go with Him. Like Elisha following the rejuvenated Elijah [see 1 Kings 19:19-21] I was ready to tear up everything I had ever known to that point and leave it all behind. But He wouldn’t hear of it. Instead He sent me home. ‘Home’; now there’s a word I hadn’t heard in a while – a concept I’d not entertained.

He said I needed to work out who I was, and be where I was set; to be in the blessed ordinariness of my humanity: an embodied witness to the One who patiently binds the ‘strong man’, and thus invites us to be clothed with our *right* mind, our true and full self. I guess sometimes following Him means simply going home, and sharing the Good News where we belong.

So, what is my name, you ask? I’ll have to get back to you on that one, but I’m working on it, in my household, with my community. Let me turn the tables, as He did with the powers that were always trying to name Him for their purposes – and the things they called Him: Law-breaker, glutton and drunkard, blasphemer, false prophet, King of the Jews, illegitimate son, and yes, even demon-possessed – let me turn the tables and ask you the same question: what is the source of *your* identity? Who gives it to you? And who might you be free to be in this Christ, the Holy One’s anointed?

It’s a tough question, I know. Sometimes, having learned to cope with it, we almost prefer our confinement to the alternative; better the demons you know, so to speak. After a while the tombs start to feel so much like home that we forget we’re estranged from our true home, our full self. It’s no easy thing to let another stand with us in the abyss, at the mouth of the shadow-bound cave, where we can hide in those things that diminish us – under the names others give us – bottling up the torrent for fear that no one can, or will, bear it. And still, for all that, there He stands, waiting for us, and with us, quietly calling us out into life.

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