

‘What Is Your Name?’
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based on Psalm 42 and Luke 8:26-39

‘What is your name?’

Names identify us as individuals. We are baptized by our name and christened into the family of God. Care is taken into giving someone a name.

I was baptized Ann Catherine Fishel. Ann is a derivative of the Hebrew name, Hannah...meaning merciful and gracious. I’ve always liked that my name means mercy and grace.

My son Daniel means ‘God is my judge.’

Thomas means ‘Two-fold blessing.’

[Does anyone know the meaning of their name?]

John – ‘YAHWAH is gracious’

Margaret – (Greek) meaning: pearl

Natalie – means ‘Christmas’

Today’s Gospel lesson of Jesus and the Gerasene demoniac is about naming. The story also sheds light on just how far Jesus would go to bring good news to people.

This fascinating story about Jesus and the Gerasene demoniac is a good story...but what makes it a great story is the picture Luke paints with only a few words.

This story comes just after the disciples were terrified about drowning when a sudden storm rocks their boat.... Luke says, “then” Jesus crosses over to the other side of the lake...into Gentile territory!

I guess it wasn’t enough the disciples were terrified of drowning, they were to be scared even more.

Jesus and his disciples are not welcome in the land of the Gerasenes. They were enemies...even talking to a Gentile made a Jew unclean!

While in the land of the Gerasenes, Jesus does the unthinkable: he enters a cemetery! Talk about unclean!

Once again, his disciples must have been terrified!

Imagine a dark, ominous sky...tombs and burial places of the long gone...maybe even a crow shrieks in the distance. There a man, supposedly running around naked, yells out from his hiding place among the tombs, “What do you have to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God?”

What does this story about Jesus in a scary place, in unfriendly territory, with a crazy person yelling at him tell us about what Jesus expected of his disciples? Then AND today?

Perhaps that there is no place or no one... anywhere that should keep us from sharing the good news??? No scary place...should keep us from actively spreading and sharing God's love and healing power.

That's one explanation. Here's another:

[pause]

Within this last week, I think I started this sermon ten times. It's been a real challenge to acknowledge the sadness of what happened in Orlando last Sunday, while at the same time being mindful of the meaning of this special day for fathers, and wondering how today's scripture readings and hymns fit into those two dynamics.

What I see in both the psalm that we read as our opening prayer and the gospel reading is a longing for God.

As the deer longs for flowing streams of water – we long to be satiated by God's love.

As the displaced, isolated, despairing demoniac named Legion longs for sanity – we too long for clarity and resolution in a violent, disturbing and sometimes, an unkind world.

Ultimately, who is it we long for? God, the Father. The divine being we believe comforts us, teaches us, walks with us, forgives us...no matter what. That is what the Bible describes as good news!

That is what the Psalmist meant when we prayed: "Our worship is a searching and finding, a loving and adoring." Our longing for God is reflected in our worship.

In this one individual narrative about Jesus' life and ministry, he asks a question to a man possessed by many demons. "What is your name?"

The man who has been stripped of dignity, isolated, and demonized said, "Legion"; for many demons had entered him.

Did you know that when you give someone a name...you give that person power? A person who can be identified by name is a person empowered...a person enabled with the ability to make choices.

Legion...who was possessed by many demons was given permission by Jesus to make a choice. Demon possession or Jesus? The man chose...Jesus.

Let's talk a minute about demons. When I talk about demons I'm not talking about Hollywood images of evil spirits. I'm talking about other kinds of demons.

Demons who possess each and every one of us if we're honest enough to admit it. They are demons that lure us in ways other than Jesus' way.

For example: there are demons of addiction; demons of materialism; demons of pride; demons of arrogance and self-centered narcissism.

We all have demons inside us...and from the looks of this story...until we can name our demons, they will continue to possess us, limit us, marginalize us, and most especially scary...keep us from being true Jesus followers...ready to follow him no matter where the call leads.

Each one of our names mean something...whether as ancient as our Hebrew or Greek ancestry...or as contemporary as a combination of names gathered together to identify you as a unique individual.

Through our baptism, we are blessed and marked as a child of God. We are also given power to choose our faith future by our being named...identified...gifted with a uniqueness God blesses through our baptism.

That means we are each given the power to make the choice of being a follower / or not / of Jesus. Power to choose Jesus...or to choose demons.

That's why the story of Legion is so important.

Naming a man possessed by many demons not only gives Jesus the power to identify the evil...but the man himself!

Jesus can only exorcise demons when the one possessed can name the demons.

This is where it gets tough. Like the disciples who followed Jesus then...and the disciples who follow Jesus today...we have to trust Jesus more than we trust our demons.

We must name our demons.

I don't want to have to name demons. I'd much rather live and dwell and pastor a congregation oblivious to demons!

But there is no such thing!! No one...no congregation...no neighborhood...no nation...no world...no person...is without demons.

Demons can be those fears...ideologies...political manipulations...beliefs...greed or addictions that lure us away from the good news and makes our souls long for the flowing streams.

Maybe one of the worst things demons do to us is keep us passive observers of the world around us. Demons *love* passive behavior. Demons preach passivity as superior to an active embrace of Jesus' good news message of love, reconciliation, giving and forgiving, and expressing a radical welcome of all into God's redeeming peace.

And until we see ourselves in the man named Legion, we will continue to want to be passive observers in a world that desperately needs converted, healed, sent-out-in mission, evangelists for the one...we...long...for!

The thing is: I don't want to be named Legion...a person with many demons. I want to be Ann: merciful and gracious!

Ann! Not Legion!

On a good day I am merciful and gracious. But there are other days I'm not. I don't want to acknowledge my demons...because that might mean I have to change.

Then, it occurred to me this week: the church, as a body, has demons. We don't want to change either! It is far, far easier to be passive observers of our world content with who we are, than to confront the demons and change.

Passive observers do not change the world!

Passive observers do not build the kingdom!

We need to work together as a body...a family of faith. Our friends and neighbors deserve a church in this neighborhood that believes in, and actively participates in healing broken people.

When Sandy Hook happened, I thought, "How can it get any worse than this?" Even though I remembered the sniper fire that rang out on the campus of Virginia Tech.

Then it was horrified members in prayer and Bible Study gunned down at Mother Emmanuel. Then, innocent victims fell to the ground in San Bernadino.

Now...it's Orlando.

We are horrified. Frightened. Unbelievably sad.

Yet, when someone loses their life in Rochester because of gun fire...we hardly notice anymore! Rather, we run and hide in the tombs!

What Jesus teaches us is if we continue to be passive observers to what is happening in our world and in our city, then evil wins. The demons remain in control.

In your bulletin are the names of those who were murdered last Sunday morning. Please...pray over their names. Then...

Name your demons. Let's go to the places Jesus leads us. I have no doubt at all...that Jesus was in the Pulse bar last Saturday night. Escorting and comforting.

Saving and freeing.

Loving and blessing.

Saying...do not be afraid. I am with you. I have called you each by name.

Come...and follow me. I will bring you home.

I love you...and you are mine.

What is your name?

Amen.