

“Legion of Hope”

I am sure that some of you have seen the television series “Homeland.” The story is about a U.S. Marine, Nicholas Brody, who is captured and held by al Qaeda for several years. He is rescued and returns home lauded as a hero. One of the subplots of the show is the relationship between him and his family. While there is outward excitement that Brody has been rescued and is returning to them there is also much trepidation. His wife had given Brody up for dead and is involved with another man. This man, a friend of Brody’s, has also taken on the role of surrogate father to the young son. The boy was very young when Brody left for Iraq and does not remember his biological dad. He is used to the surrogate father and wary of Brody. The teenage daughter is in her rebellious phase and finds the family upheaval confusing and the secrets hypocritical. Additionally, while Brody is glad to be free he is unsure how to be a dad and husband. He continues certain practices that gave him comfort as a prisoner such as sleeping on the floor or in a corner. Needless to say this is not the idyllic reunion of family that we romanticize. In a word, it is fraught.

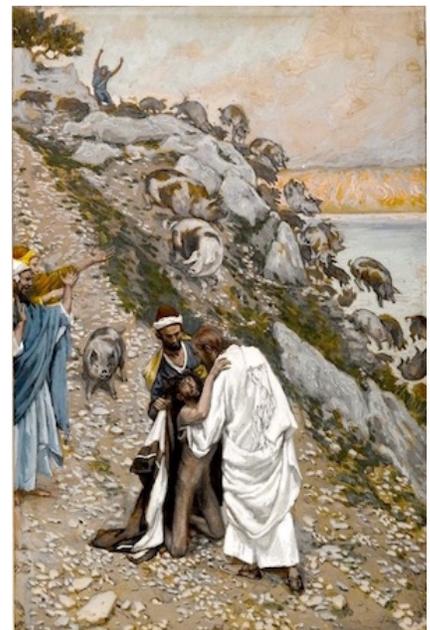
This is similar to what happens at the end of today’s Gospel lesson. The Gerasene town has been tormented by this demoniac for years. You would think that they would want to have the situation resolved and get back to normal. However, Jesus’ solution to the demoniac’s condition does not sit well with them. First of all they lose an entire herd of pigs which drown themselves in the sea after being infected with the demons that had previously inhabited the demoniac.

Second, Jesus’ curing of the demoniac has upset what is normal. They have gotten used to dealing with the man. Now that he is in his right mind they are not sure how to deal with him. He is a stranger now. Moreover, they are worried about what other sorts of “cures” Jesus will bring to them. Cures that upset the status quo are not seen as cures at all by these folks. Thus they ask Jesus to leave.

Jesus who normally accepts new followers tells the cured man that he should stay in this town rather than join Jesus. He wants the man to stay as witness to the miracle, but also witness to the power that Jesus has to cure people in the name of God. The demoniac is to be both an example of Jesus’ power as the Son of God, and an evangelist to this Gentile town.

As St. Paul writes in his letter to the Galatians, “before faith came, we were imprisoned and guarded under the law until faith would be revealed.” While as Gentiles these people are not imprisoned by the Law of Moses, that is the Torah, they are still imprisoned. They are not able to see who is standing before them. On the Jewish side of the sea people are astounded by the miracles of healing that Jesus performs. They are drawn to him in a way that this group is not.

Perhaps it is the loss of their property and livelihood that imprisons them. Perhaps it is their prejudice against the Jews that imprisons them. Perhaps it is their inability to comprehend the healing of the man with the legion of unclean spirits.



Perhaps it is like the family in “Homeland” who having had their prayers and dreams fulfilled find that things are not the way they thought they would be. The townsfolk hoped for the man’s healing, but they did not reckon the cost. At this point they cannot comprehend the cost. They also are unable to see the value in the possessed man’s healing. After all, they had gotten used to the way things were. They were not great, but they had adjusted.

When we invite Jesus into our lives we may think that we are in for a greeting card kind of Jesus or what the movie “Dogma” parodied as the Buddy Christ. A short of kindly hippie dude giving you a shout out, the thumbs up and a wink. After all that is what is easiest to take. A Jesus that does not challenge us or our satisfactions with our self and our life.



That is not the Jesus of the New Testament. Jesus came into their lives and comes into ours full of compassion, love, and the power of healing. Those qualities of Jesus’ are transformative. They do not allow us or our demons to sit still. When Jesus cures our ills we do not just get up and go on our way as if nothing happened. We are changed as surely as the demoniac was changed.

He was no longer possessed or a danger to himself or anyone else, but we do not hear that anyone in the story claimed him as family. We do not hear shouts of celebration from the townsfolk for his healing. We hear concern about pigs and the scary man that caused the pigs to jump into the sea.

We hear the man wanting to come away from the tombs, a symbol of death, to follow the one who gave him his life back. Despite his ardor Jesus commands him to stay and be an example of the power of God. Having tormented this town for years, he may not feel safe or at home, but that is where Jesus is telling him to minister.

When God calls the prophets balk. Moses complains he has a stutter. Isaiah cries out in woe as a man of unclean lips. God feeds Ezekiel the scroll that he may literally ingest the teachings. Jonah leaves town on a ship bound in the opposite direction of Nineveh, the town God was sending him to. Even Jesus took forty days of fasting in the wilderness to figure out what this call from God meant and how he might fulfill it.

This change is part of what Dietrich Bonhoeffer called “The Cost of Discipleship.” Discipleship is not easy and most of us fail at it often. But we also know that when we are in communion with God there is nothing better, even with the cost in front of our faces. The sublime moments when we feel the deep love of God fill our hearts and souls are worth the cost.

The Christian life is not an easy life neither is it misery. The joy deep in our souls gives us strength for the journey. The psalmist wrote, “As the deer longs for the water-brooks, / so longs my soul for you, O God. / Put your trust in God; / for I will yet give thanks to him, / who is the help of my countenance, and my God.”