

WHAT IS YOUR NAME?

Series: "Questions Jesus Asked"

By Steve Zeisler

I rarely remember dreams when I wake up, but I had a series of nightmares when I was young that I can still remember. I was watching television on a Saturday afternoon when I was eight or nine years old, and saw a film of Edgar Allan Poe's *The Cask of Amontillado*. I subsequently spent many nights dreaming about the end of that story.

Poe's story is one of hatred disguised as friendship. At a costume party, the victim, in harlequin garb, is led deep into the wine cellar beneath a great ancestral home, ostensibly to taste a recently acquired amontillado. The unsuspecting victim is chained in a dark crevice as the murderer closes up the opening with bricks. He ignores the increasingly desperate cries for mercy. The torch light grows dim, and the story ends with a death knell sounded by the tinkling bells on top of the harlequin's hat.

I think Edgar Allan Poe's genius lies not only in his gifts as a storyteller but in his psychological insight. *The Cask of Amontillado* is not only about a terrible act of revenge, but it's also a metaphor for what happens inside us. The revenge and cruelty, the dark, dripping cavern beneath the well-lit upper chambers, the evil secret, the walled-up crevice with death inside, are all metaphors for the human condition.

In a series of studies we recently did on the opening chapters of Genesis (Discovery Papers [4550-4566](#)), we observe that naturalism has gripped the thinking of the modern world. It is the insistence that all phenomena can be explained by natural causes and that there are no unseen persons or forces that influence the world we live in. Naturalism has the terrible effect of ignoring the God who has made everything. The light is dimmed in circles where this philosophy is embraced.

But there is another problem that flows from the insistence that everything can be explained by natural causes, and that is that the darkness is not understood either. Our world is dominated by the dangerous notion that we are on track to understand all mysteries and fix all problems. The mind of man will eventually remove all obstacles to human greatness, we are told.

Below is an item from a wire service that ran on July 5, 1998 in New York newspapers:

"Five adults were arraigned Thursday on charges that they sexually abused several children in their Brooklyn apartment 10 months after the city returned the children to their parents following their removal to a foster home. The 5 adults have been charged with forcing 4 children to have sex with them. Police say that 3 of the children involved were abused by their own parents, and they were also forced to perform sexual acts with a dog. The adults face various charges including sodomy, incest, and rape. Police say the victims include an 8-year-old boy and two girls ages 13 and 14." (1)

Such terrible deeds are done by people gripped by forces man-made science will never control. Naturalism denies the existence of both God and the devil. Both denials have serious consequences.

In the last message we looked at a storm on a lake, a story of circumstances that were out of control. We talked about the times when the events of our lives are chaotic and frightening. Jesus asked the disciples in the midst of the storm on the lake, "Why are you so afraid?" There are answers to the fear of the turmoil of storms.

The issue before us in this message is related but different. It concerns not external circumstances that are chaotic, but inward conditions that are frightening and terrible. The question the Lord will ask in the center of this story is, "What is your name?" It's a question of identity, of untangling and bringing to light what is inside. We'll return more than once to ask that question of ourselves as we read the passage.

In Mark 5:1-20 it is still the same night as in 4:35-41. That day Jesus had had a teaching ministry all day long. At the end of the day he was very tired. He said, "Let us go over to the other side." They got in the boat, probably at dusk or sometime late in the day, and the harrowing experience with the storm that I just mentioned. Now the storm and the journey are over. It is sometime in the middle of the night.

They went across the lake to the region of the Gerasenes. When Jesus got out of the boat, a man with an evil spirit came from the tombs to meet him. This man lived in the tombs, and no one could bind him any more, not even with a chain. For he had often been chained hand and foot, but he tore the chains apart and broke the irons on his feet. No one was strong enough to subdue him. Night and day among the tombs and in the hills he would cry out and cut himself with stones.

When he saw Jesus from a distance, he ran and fell on his knees in front of him. He shouted at the top of his voice, "What do you want with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? Swear to God that you won't torture me!" For Jesus had said to him, "Come out of this man, you evil spirit!" Then Jesus asked him, "What is your name?"

"My name is Legion," he replied, "for we are many." And he begged Jesus again and again not to send them out of the area.

A large herd of pigs was feeding on the nearby hillside. The demons begged Jesus, "Send us among the pigs; allow us to go into them." He gave them permission, and the evil spirits came out and went into the pigs. The herd, about two thousand in number, rushed down the steep bank into the lake and were drowned.

Those tending the pigs ran off and reported this in the town and countryside, and the people went out to see what had happened. When they came to Jesus, they saw the man who had been possessed by the legion of demons, sitting there, dressed and in his right mind; and they were afraid. Those who had seen it told the people what had happened to the demon-possessed man-and told about the pigs as well. Then the people began to plead with Jesus to leave their region.

As Jesus was getting into the boat, the man who had been demon-possessed begged to go with him. Jesus did not let him, but said, "Go home to your family and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and how he has had mercy on you." So the man went away and began to tell in the Decapolis how much Jesus had done for him. And all the people were amazed.

THE EXISTENCE OF DEMONS

The reference to demons here is not easy, of course, for modern, educated people. It is thought that civilization and education dispel the superstitious fears of the ancients, and that there are no such things as demons, only human fears that get called by these names. But the Bible is quite clear that there are in fact fallen angels in the world, evil personalities that are bent on destroying what God loves. Jesus said of the devil and, by implication all the fallen angels, that he could be summed up as having two priorities or passions: murder and lies. "[The devil]...was a murderer from the beginning...he is a liar and the father of lies" (John 8:44). Demons are finite in number, and God has placed limits on their capacity for destruction.

Further, the world, the flesh, and the devil, which the New Testament says is the array of problems that

assail us, are related along a continuum. Rivalry with God and worship of self, with their attendant degradation and hypocrisy, are similar whether they're encountered in demons, in the proud ideas and patterns of the world, or in our own sin nature. This terrible account of a tragic figure demonized by not just one evil personality but a legion of them is a worst-case scenario. But this most dramatic version of the lesson will have application to people who are not invaded by foreign personalities. It will also be applicable to the sin nature that resides in us: our own rebellion against God, our own pride and love of self, our own inclination to do what's wrong, to prefer unrighteousness.

THE EFFECT OF AN UNCLEAN SPIRIT

With that in mind, let's look at the passage. Do your best to imagine the eeriest, most frightening sort of landscape. Jesus and the disciples landed their boat on the shore of the Sea of Galilee in the region of the Gerasenes. There were some caves and tombs, and in the moonlight there may have been evidence of the recent storm-branches and other debris. There were also these two thousand pigs moving around restlessly on the adjacent hillside, upset from the storm. Devout Jews to this day feel revulsion at the presence of pigs.

Then a naked man came running down the hill screaming at them. Matthew tells us there was at least one other man who lived in the tombs, and that travelers avoided the place because of their violent behavior.

The disciples must have been confused and scared; "What in the world is going to happen now? What have we gotten ourselves into? This night has already been so terrible, how can things get even worse?"

Let's consider what Mark tells us about the demonized man. What was his life like before this night? We're told that he had an unclean spirit, or a demon. He was unfit for the company and approval of others, and not only that, but association with him was contaminating by his unclean status. He was isolated. There was at least one other demonized soul who lived there, but the very horror that made up their lives forbade them any kind of meaningful contact with each other. The people of the town had last approached this man with claims which he tore apart.

He could not stop himself from being violent to others and to himself. He hated who he was. He was tormented and self-destructive, slashing himself with stones and going about unclothed. We know what it's like to rebel against God. We know what it's like to feel unclean, unworthy of association with good people, to feel as if our life contaminates others. We know what it's like to be isolated, to try to have relationships with other people and have them retreat from us. We know what it's like to be out of control, to have habits and pressures and thoughts that make us want to do what we hate doing, and whatever chains we use to stop ourselves prove inadequate. We know what it's like to be tormented and self-destructive. The Gerasene demoniac experienced in the extreme what all of us experience in some degree.

THE CONVOLUTED PATH TO FREEDOM

The heart of this passage is the conversation that began when this man saw from a distance that the boat was occupied by no ordinary captain. He began to rush toward the boat and its terrified occupants.

The conversation in this passage is so convoluted, I spent a long time last week trying to figure out who said what when. I think Mark deliberately wrote it in a confusing way. It was confusing even to Jesus. He didn't always know to whom he was talking.

The order in which events are told is peculiar. Verses 6-7 say the man saw Jesus from a distance, ran and fell on his knees in front of him, and shouted at the top of his voice, "What do you want with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? Swear to God that you won't torture me!" Now that sounds like the first statement made, but notice verse 8 says, "For Jesus had [already] said to him, 'Come out of this man, you evil spirit!' Mark didn't record the events in the order in which they occurred. And he wrote it that way deliberately, I'm convinced, because freedom from interior rebellion often comes in tangled fits and starts.

Jesus saw the man running down the hill looking and sounding terrible. The first thing Jesus said was, "Come out of this man, you evil spirit!" Jesus was not unfamiliar with addressing demonized people. In Mark 1 he rebuked an unclean spirit and the spirit departed. I think the Lord assumed here that he had

spoken a command and that the command had been obeyed. In that case the statement in verse 7 would have been the words of a desperate man. "What do you want with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? Swear to God that you won't torture me!"

These sentences spoken together are the doctrine of hell. To have such clear knowledge of the person and status of Jesus, yet believe he's a torturer-one come to hurt and condemn-is the worst condition of all.

TWO LEVELS OF IDENTITY

When Jesus heard the man still expressing demonic thinking, he realized that his initial command banishing the demon had not finished the job. So he asked, "What is your name?" Jesus was determined to sort out what was tangled in this man's life. This is a provocative question on many levels, but right now we'll concentrate on two: (1) "What is your name?" can mean "What identity is going to finally remain? When it becomes clear to you who you are, by what name will you be known? What father is going to give you a name that you will bear throughout the days of your life?" And, (2) "What is your name?" can mean "What dark things are there within you?" This sense of the question makes dark realities take their name-things that we would hide from and deny: lust, addictions, jealousy, hatred, bitterness, obsession. These things influence us destructively, but they stay hidden from view, like a legion of demons.

When Jesus asked this question, these evil personalities who had resided in this man and had terrorized the community were forced to speak of themselves. The reason they hadn't been banished the first time is that there were too many of them. Jesus hadn't understood the level of ruin that this man was living with, but now he would address them all.

They begged him not to make them leave the area. Now, Jesus didn't have a soft spot for demons. He didn't answer, in effect, "I'm sorry it's hard for you. I know you don't want to leave-let's find some alternative." That wasn't the issue at all. This hoard of horrible entities longed to stay in that region. It was a place of death, with caves where dead people were buried. It was a place of unclean animals. It was a place of fearful circumstances. It was a place where violence was accomplished and lives were ruined. It was a stronghold of evil by the sea of Galilee, the region where Messiah was born. That's why they said, "Don't make us leave."

Jesus knew that in order for anybody to be sure that they had been banished, he had to do something dramatic. If he just invisibly banished them, no onlooker would know for sure whether they were gone, whether the wicked place had been cleansed. So he gave them what they wanted, but not what they intended. He gave them permission to go into the pigs, which proceeded to drown themselves in the lake. Then it became clear that this place was no longer inhabited by demons. The stronghold had been taken by One who was stronger.

Mark doesn't make clear whether the townspeople reacted with ungodly motives or not. He just says they were afraid. You can understand why. I think the disciples were terrified. It was presumably the next morning by the time the pig-herders had gathered everybody to come out and see what occurred. During the night a storm had suddenly stopped, a howling demoniac had been made well, and a herd of pigs had been destroyed. What would all these events lead to?

Jesus left them with a witness. He told the man to go back to the people in the area and tell them what had happened. Later the gospel flourished in the Decapolis. We know from the book of Acts that there was a strong church in Damascus, one of the cities of the Decapolis (that's where Paul went when he was first converted, and he was welcomed and discipled there). So this region became a fertile field for evangelism, partly because, like the account of the woman of Samaria, awareness of an extraordinary act of mercy and power made people ready to hear more of the Savior..

THE ONE WHO IS IN COMMAND

The question Jesus asked remains crucial. "What is your name? With what identity will you make your way in the world?" A lot of people will tell us who they think we are. Voices from our past will try to lay claim to us in the present. We must insist that Jesus' claim on us, and nothing else, answers the question of our identity.

Further, it is helpful to see Jesus at work, exposing the dark things inside that flourish when they remain unnamed. We will never experience healing if we keep our sin covered up. What things in your life need to be named? What are you hiding from yourself, what dead body has been walled up in the crevice down in the basement? The Lord calls for the legion to name itself. It is the work of a loving Savior. He calmly does the surgery and banishes the terrible things, just as he did for the man who had screamed, "Have you come to torture me?" and who was sitting calmly at Jesus' feet by the end of the story, clothed and in his right mind.

This was a wild night. It started with a threatening storm on a lake. It proceeded directly to tombs and pigs and death and violence in a region of the lake that had become a stronghold for evil. The disciples went from the frying pan to the fire to a bonfire. Every time they turned around, conditions grew more frightful. Jesus stilled the storm, calmed the waves, banished the demons, and healed the man from the tombs.

He is no different today. He understands who we are and cares enough about us to want to make us whole. He intends us to be the kind of people of faith who can go into our world and say, "I have something to tell you about what God has done for me." He is no less committed, no less in charge, not overwhelmed by the things that we bring to him. He doesn't find them too hard to handle.

Notes:

1. From www.pathfinder.com/NY1/indexmak.html, approximately (at July 7, 1998, date of publication of this message, changed to www.pathfinder.com/NY1/index.html).

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