

What Is Your Name?

Immediately after his sharing the parables about soils and seeds in last week's text, Jesus invites the disciples to get into a boat with him and head to the other side of the lake, the Sea of Galilee. Storms stir up while Jesus naps in the back of the boat. The panicked disciples wake him up. He calms the storm with a word and shakes his head at their lack of faith. In the meantime, they wonder aloud about who this man is who can tell the wind and the sea to be still. It's quite a boat ride. But even before the winds blew and the waters churned, this was never just a three hour tour or simply a relaxed day on the water. Jesus is intentionally crossing boundaries and going into new territory, Gentile territory, and he is taking the disciples with him.

The story of the boat ride and the story that Mark tells in our text today are vivid. They are filled with sounds and images that speak to us on a different level, if we allow them to. I am much more comfortable staying in my head. I would prefer analyzing the language and finding a rational explanation for the events that occur and the intellectual lesson Jesus wants me, wants us to take away. But the more time I spent with this text this week, the more the words and images tugged at me and insisted on drawing me beyond my comfort zone. As I read the text, I invite you to close your eyes and listen to see where and if the text tugs at you, too. [Read Mark 5:1-20]

I had never heard of Nipsy Hussle before his death in March, when he was killed by a gunman in his clothing store in Los Angeles. Mr. Hussle was not the only one shot that day. Kerry Lathan was hit by the gunman's bullets, too. Lathan had just been released from prison and was on probation. He was at the store to pick up a t-shirt. After police determined he was healthy enough, Lathan was arrested and held in the Men's Central Jail in L.A. for violating his parole. He was charged with associating with a gang member, Nipsey Hussle:

Never mind that Hussle had been lauded as a businessman and a philanthropist, mourned with a 25-mile procession through the streets of South Los Angeles...Or that he had been killed one day before he was set to sit down with the city's police chief to talk about reducing gang violence.¹

¹ Tim Arango, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/04/19/us/nipsey-hussle-death-california-gangs.html>

He was still labeled a gang member. It seems that California law enforcement keeps a database, a list of gang members, and no one really updates it. Lathan had served 25 years in prison for murder, but he worked hard to turn his life around while he was there. Hussle had helped him and his family when he got out, giving him clothes and a car through Lathan's sister. Lathan's mistake was crossing paths with Hussle, a rapper who was working on bridging divides and working to improve the city where he lived. Hussle was also a name that remained on that list. And as one gang expert laments, "No one ever makes it off that list. No one."²

I recognize that it's my privilege that makes it impossible for me to imagine being on that list. That said, there are lists of all kinds that we cannot take ourselves off of, tags we cannot shake, identities that will not let us go. Experiences, traumas, stereotypes, and powers wrap around us like chains and keep us tied to dead ends that loom like proverbial tombs. I think that's why this text feels like a gut punch. This man, who by no fault of his own is claimed by powers beyond his control and forced to wear chains that tie him to the tombs, to protect him and anyone else he might hurt when the demons have their way with him. I am so sick and tired of the cruel nonsense that tells us that we can be anything or do anything with just enough will power and stick-to-itiveness. Yes, hard work, personal responsibility, and accountability are important, but there are some chains that cannot be broken simply by bucking up or digging deep and ginning up a bit more gumption. Some chains are all too real, and some tombs are ever looming no matter what we do. And thank God, Jesus knows it, too.

This man comes out to meet Jesus almost at the water's edge. He is not bound by chains at the moment, but Mark tells us that he has an unclean spirit. The truth is the spirit—or spirits—have him, possess him. Chains cannot hold him, but he is still tied to the tombs and the mountains, the fringes of the community. He howls at all hours. And he cuts himself with rocks. The demons are ever-present, ever-having, ever-holding, ever-binding. And even the promise of a cure sends him shrieking and begging Jesus not to torture him.

I'm intrigued by this Jesus who hangs out around tombs. He doesn't stay there, of course, but he has a way of being found in or around them. Tombs cannot hold him, but they do have a way of holding on to those he seeks out. So he is met by this man, this homeless, naked, possessed man, and he asks his name. I have heard it said that those people I avoid eye contact with on the streets, the ones without homes who beg for a few cents

² Arango

to buy coffee or whatever else just want to be seen, to be acknowledged as human beings. Jesus knows this of course, and he immediately humanizes the man by asking his name. And the man responds, “Legion.” I’d bet every last cent that that is not the name on his birth certificate, not the name his mother called him—even when he was in trouble, not the name his grandmother whispered or even the one his best friend called out when it was time to go play. But it is now the only name he knows. It is a name that points not simply to his own mental state, but the state of the people hearing Mark’s story. Legion is a Roman term, a military term that points to oppression and occupation. Legions are forces that dictate everything about the community’s life, forces that do not want the best for those they occupy, forces that only care about domination, power, and control. This man is not his own. Instead he is owned by the demons that occupy him, body and soul. He is on that list, the list of the has-beens and untouchables, the list of nobodies and no-thank-yous and not todays. And there is no way he is getting off that list. Not on his own anyway. Not without some help from Jesus.

Interestingly enough, the demons know their time is up when Jesus appears, and they beg him to let them go into a herd of pigs. Poor pigs. But Mark is more concerned with the man than with the pigs. After the swines’ fateful swim, the pig farmers race to let everyone know what took place. And the people come out to see for themselves, and there sits the man, clothed and “completely sane,” or in his right mind, as another translation reads). No longer tugging at chains or torn by demons, the man has been restored, removed from that list and added to a different one—not because of his good deeds or his followers on Twitter or his faithfulness or his SAT scores or his bank account, but because of Jesus, this one who crosses into enemy territory, lingers by the tombs, and asks his name.

You and I do not hang out in the tombs. We do not spend our nights howling in the shadows at Roundtop, but you and I know—if we’re willing to admit it—that different chains, menacing tombs, and demons of all sorts that threaten us and those we hold dear. It is the church’s job, our vocation, and our calling to proclaim release to the captives, to declare that no earthly list holds a final claim on us or anyone else. But you and I know that those lists can be stubborn, that those chains and those tombs have us in their grip, too. On too many days we can find our name on the list of Legions ourselves. Too many demons, too many dangers, toils, and snares come from too many directions. Too many forces occupy our hearts and minds, staking claim

to our loyalty and our very beings. Denying the demons is futile. Deciding that the chains are something we just need to live with or find our own way out of is a demonic farce all its own.

And so we need to hear Jesus ask us our names again. Yes, most of us have long been claimed in our baptism, but that claim can seem so long ago and far away some days. Maybe your name today is not Legion. Maybe your name is Grief or Depression or Revenge or Anxiety or Fear or Sadness or Anger or Resentment or Bone-tired Weariness. Maybe you are ashamed of the ways you do not live up to someone else's ideal. Maybe you are consumed with disappointment because of all the ways others have not lived up to yours. Maybe you have been stripped bare by the demands that tear at you. Maybe you have lost sight of where home truly is. Maybe you have too many chains to count or have found yourself stuck outside too many tombs. And yet, Jesus has come to you, too. He is standing here, unafraid of the tombs, the chains, the lists, or the howls, and he is asking, "What is your name?"

The end of the story is not simply a happy one. The community begs Jesus to leave. He's too disruptive, perhaps, too powerful maybe. The man begs to come along, to climb in the boat with Jesus, but Jesus sends him home, back to his people to tell what God has done in and for him. It is our calling, too, to proclaim Christ's disruptive, chain-breaking, loving, liberating, and healing ways with every fiber of our being, to declare that Jesus knows the demons that hold us in their grips, to remind the world that there is no need to hide our struggles. That is our calling, but it is not easy to admit that anything else has me in its grip, and sometimes I have a hard time hearing that Jesus wants to hear me say the name I wear but do not want to utter. But he still wants to hear it and knows I need to say it, because he wants to give me a new name. In fact he already has. The chains, the tombs, the lists do not define me. They never have. Not in any ultimate or eternal sense. Christ does. And as much as it hurts to say it out loud, healing begins when I am able to say, "My name is Legion. My name is Weariness. My name is Cynicism. My name is Fear." Because only after I say it out loud and claim it am I able to hear him claim me again. And of course, he does. He always does; he always has; he always will.

Thanks be to God. Amen.