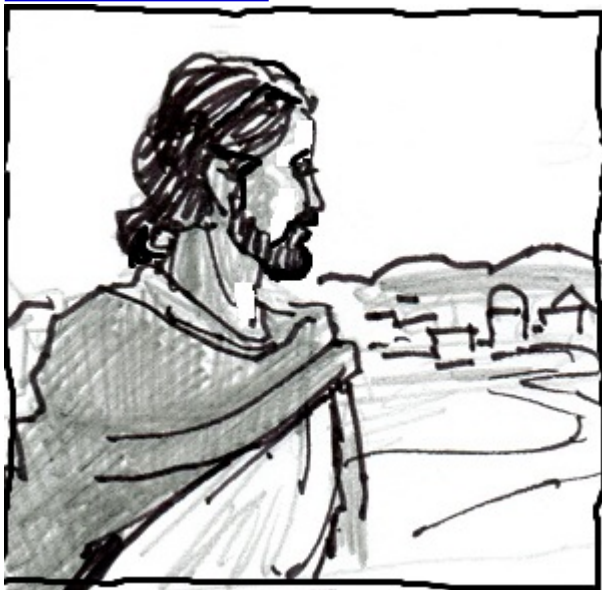


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by Pat Marrin

[View Author Profile](#)

[patrickjmarrin@gmail.com](mailto:patrickjmarrin@gmail.com).

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“Legion is my name. There are many of us” (Mark 5:10).

*2 Sam 15:13-14, 30; 16:5-13; Mark 5:1-20*

The Lectionary’s juxtaposition of today’s two readings may or may not have thematic importance, but the two scenes are almost cinematic in their chaos. King David is verbally and physically assaulted by a clansman of Saul as he flees his own son Absalom. Under a rain of stones and dirt, Shimei rages against David for his deceptions and murders, and David, acknowledging that his kingdom has reached its nadir, restrains his officers from killing the man. In Mark’s Gospel, a demoniac rants at Jesus for invading his territory and threatening to expel his unclean spirit, identified not as singular but as “legion,” in the thousands. The victim of this possession is self-destructive and unrestrainable, breaking chains and shackles the locals have used to subdue him among the tombs.

As we take in these narrative details, we realize what real power looks like. David, because of his crimes, has forfeited his integrity and the justice that must underly all legitimate authority. His only chance now is to acknowledge his guilt and pray for mercy. Jesus, on the other hand, has power over even a legion of unclean spirits because he possesses the Holy Spirit. The opposing spirits within the demoniac acknowledge this and beg for mercy, asking to be expelled into a huge herd of swine. This “legion” of animals regarded by Jews as unclean rushes into the sea and is drowned.

The story of David offers all contenders for power a stark lesson about its limits and the need to exercise it with justice. No earthly power can stand for long if it lacks moral legitimacy. One barely veiled message of Mark's account of the Gerasene demoniac is that the territory across the sea was at the time controlled by Rome, the commercial sponsor of the swineherding that produced pork for export. Mark's intent was to show that even the Roman legions could not counter the divine authority of Jesus.

One of Mark's central themes is that the Kingdom of God first uproots the power of all other so-called kingdoms at the spiritual level. Evil falls because Satan, the hidden source of rebellion against God, is expelled along with all his minions. At the approach of Jesus, these spiritual agents of evil first acknowledge his superior power. The demons stand down and flee, ironic evangelists to the advance of glory over their master. The house of Satan falls because the "strong man" has been bound by the power of God. At the name of Jesus, every knee shall bend, and even the principalities and powers, the thrones and dominations, give way before the cosmic Christ.

St. Paul will joyfully make these theological assertions, and while they may seem abstract to our ears, the message is the foundation of all our hopes in a world that often feels chaotic and tilted toward evil and the abuse of power. That question was answered by the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, who alone is Lord.

Gandhi, who grounded his movement in the nonviolence of Jesus, put this succinctly: "When I despair, I remember that all through history the way of truth and love have always won. There have been tyrants and murderers, and for a time, they can seem invincible, but in the end, they always fall. Think of it always."

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