

Sermon preached at Gisborne, 19 June 2022

Holy One, prepare us to receive your word. As we listen in faith and hope, open our souls to your quenching waters. Free us from the confinement of our hearts, that we may hear the promise of your love.

Luke 8:26-39

### ***From terror to wholeness***

In today's reading, we see terrors and wholeness in one setting. The word 'terror' is from the word φοβέω (*fobeo* - to fear) in v35, as its noun form φόβος (*fobos* - fear, terror) in v37. The word 'wholeness' is from the verb σῶζω (*sozo* – save, heal), which means wholeness in spirit, wholeness in soul, and wholeness in body. Those who meet Jesus in person and see or experience the power of his authority either encounter terror or wholeness. The story is very relevant even today as 'terror' can be anything that may threaten our daily life, and everyone may wish to live in wholeness in the midst of suffering. The keywords also play important roles in our faith.

### ***Terror (fobos)***

Terror appears in different forms in Luke's passage. For instance, when Jesus commands the impure spirit to come out of the man, the demon-speaking man replies, "Do not torment me."<sup>1</sup> For him, Jesus is a great menace that can destroy his being. It is a sheer terror for him. Exorcizing demons has been part of Jesus' ministry because, in God's kingdom, things distorted or damaged are fully restored. In the bible, demons have a few things in common: they cause self-destructive behaviour in the victim. They separate the victim from everyday living in the family and community. Even today, if we define 'demons' as those forces that have captured us and prevented us from becoming what God intends us to be, we are possessed by as many demons as those whom Jesus encountered.

When Jesus asks him what his name is, he answers that his name is 'legion.'<sup>2</sup> Just imagine a person occupied by so many evil spirits, for 'legion' is a loan word from Latin '*legio*', which designates the largest Roman unit of troops consisting of 5,600 men. As such, the man's life is

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<sup>1</sup> Luke 8:28-29

<sup>2</sup> Λεγιών, also λεγεών, is a loanword from Latin (*legio*) and designates the largest Roman unit of troops. In the 1st cent, twenty-five legions formed the core of the standing army. A legion comprised 5600 men, divided into ten cohorts, each with five or six centuriae.

a *terror* not only for himself but for the townspeople who have tried to preserve him and themselves from the power of the demons.

As the story unfolds, however, Jesus' exorcism becomes a *terror* to them. While Jesus restores the man's life, their economy has been destroyed by the loss of their pigs. The man's healing becomes a disaster to them. Just imagine what farmers would do if someone destroyed their livestock. For the townspeople, Jesus' healing power is just as bad as tornadoes or floods. It makes us contemplate our ways of seeing the power of God. While it is terror for the townspeople, it is wholeness for the demoniac.

### ***Wholeness (sozo)***

The healed or saved demoniac becomes whole in two ways. The man becomes whole when the *legion* – unclean spirits left him. Also, when he can return to the community where he used to belong, he becomes whole. On the surface, when freed from the demons, the townspeople supposedly accept him. Yet his wholeness becomes terror for them. As read, “they found the man from whom the demons had gone out, sitting at Jesus' feet, dressed and in his right mind; and they were afraid.”<sup>3</sup> When he was chained, he was separated from the people living in the tombs. When unshackled, he seems still separated from them as people are afraid of him in his right mind. The healing even cost their means of living. The reading shows there can be even greater demon possession among people. When people prioritize things according to their human standards while forgetting God's priority, God's healing power for wholeness can be seen as terror.

As such, even though the man desperately wants to follow Jesus, Jesus sends him back to his town to live as a witness to God's grace. It may be difficult for him to return to his hometown, where he is still a person who is not welcomed there. Yet Jesus sends him back to the community as if he sows a seed in rocky ground or thorn bushes. The man's mission is to live his life as a seed of God's mighty saving work. Initially, we thought that terror is something visible and thereby avoidable as long as we notice it. When the demoniac was identified as terror, he was chained; the townspeople kept the terror at bay. But how can we check unseen or hidden terror in people's hearts and minds, which is filling the void of the absence of God's love and grace? What do we do?

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<sup>3</sup> Luke 8:35

In general, we can see terrors through personal/social events and news that can threaten the safety and stability of our nation and our personal lives. We Christians became whole when we were baptized and received Jesus Christ as our saviour. But our weak bodies and souls often prevent us from living such wholeness. Still we live the wholeness of God daily not because we are perfect but because of our faith in Christ through the worship of God and breaking the bread together, studying scripture and praying daily as one body of Christ.

Similar to the man cured, we are also called to tell how God restored us to the wider community. We love to say that God is love and compassion, but we don't say much about the cost of discipleship or taking up the cross in the faith journey. While the God who is the pure love, this God doesn't want us only a bit, but our whole beings to become living sacrifices.<sup>4</sup> As part of the wholeness of God, we wish to share this wholeness with others. Will people see us as terror or wholeness? May God help us live as wholeness in Christ. Amen.

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<sup>4</sup> Romans 12:1- Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship.