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identity



*The most common form of
despair is not being who you are.*

SØREN KIERKEGAARD

Who are you?

If I were to ask you that question straight up, you might respond with some version of your Facebook profile: “Here’s where I went to school; these are my favorite movies, books, and bands; I like to fish, hunt, play video games, go scuba diving, and listen to Jay-Z.”

But who are you *really*, behind the avatars you’ve created for yourself? What are you covering up? What are you afraid of? What are you hoping for? Where are you going?

If you’re like most people in our society, you live in a perpetual identity crisis—with countless voices competing for your attention, across a dizzying array of platforms, telling you who you are and who you ought to be.

So, who are you?

Forgive me for being so forward. I know we've only just met. I don't mean to be abrupt or intrusive. But if we're going to say anything truthful about becoming more like Jesus, surely we have to tell the truth about ourselves first. I know it's a little premature to be disrobing our souls to one another. On the other hand, if you read books the way most people do—in the bedroom or bathroom or squeezed into an uncomfortably small seat on an overcrowded airplane, shielded by the false privacy of headphones—this is already a pretty intimate thing we're doing. Besides, our lives are too important to remain hidden behind self-protective social graces. So, let's get right to it.

What if it were possible to know your true identity? What if it were possible to hear the name we were given before the foundation of the world? What if it were possible to be so truly and fully alive—so *fully human*—that no matter what happened, you would be able to live without fear?

My name is Legion . . . for we are many

One of the more arresting yet disconcerting encounters in the life of Jesus is recorded in Mark 5, when He meets a man terrorized by demons. According to the text, this was a man who “lived among the tombs” (verse 3). Despite multiple attempts to restrain him, not even chains were able to control his volatile behavior. Night and day he roamed the

town, “howling and bruising himself with stones” (verse 5). Upon encountering Jesus, the demons within the man were paralyzed with fear: “What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I adjure you by God, do not torment me” (verse 7). When Jesus asks the man, “What is your name?” he responds, “My name is Legion; for we are many” (verse 9).

As products of a modern Western culture, in which we seldom dare to wonder whether there is a greater force of evil in the world beyond the sum of its parts, we might find such a story laughably primitive. Given our advances in medical technology, psychology, and biochemistry, and as able as we are to live our lives in relative isolation from the realities of evil, perhaps we feel too sophisticated to take the idea of demons seriously. And yet the plight of the Gerasene demoniac has never been more relevant than in the twenty-first century.

One description of Satan in the New Testament refers to him as “the prince of the power of the air” (Ephesians 2:2, ESV). What a provocative image of evil in an age in which wireless technology has allowed us to be “connected” wherever we are, even as we’re hopelessly disconnected from our identity as God’s beloved children. “Living among the tombs” seems an apt description of the time we spend in the earbud-enhanced privacy of our own alternate realities, where constant access to technology drives us apart even when we’re together. Research has shown that our dependence on technology is changing our brains—and, by most

accounts, not for the better.¹ In our day and age, we don't have to believe in demons to be given over to despair and distraction. We simply have to go wireless.

We are subjected to a thousand different voices competing for our attention. We present images of our lives through Facebook, Twitter, or other alternate realities, that are perhaps more reflective of who we want to be than of who we really are.² It's so easy to manipulate our "identity" to suit the differing expectations of our home, school, work, religious, and social communities. Never before have we had so many forms of communication at our disposal, and yet rarely has our sense of loneliness and alienation been so profound. In an age of relentless self-expression, do we have any idea who we really are?

The question Jesus asks is a frightening one in a world given over to so many voices, so many images, so many screens, so many sounds, so many identities. In those four simple words—"What is your name?"—everything about the half-life of this man is called into question.

Whether or not we believe in the reality of demons, a truthful response to the question for many of us would be, "My name is Legion . . . for we are many." Many voices, many activities, many interests, many influences.

I find it interesting that it wasn't the sight of a tormented man injuring himself with stones that frightened the Gerasene people. Just as in our day, they had become accustomed to all the noise and violence. It wasn't even the spectacle of two thousand hogs running headlong into the

Sea of Galilee. No, it wasn't all the uproar that caught everyone's attention; it was seeing the former demoniac sitting next to Jesus, clothed and in his right mind, that struck fear in their hearts (Mark 5:15).

In a world where self-destructive behavior has become commonplace, the most frightening scenario may not be a global apocalypse. Perhaps the most startling thing to see is someone whom we have come to expect to be as fragmented, fractured, and self-destructive as we are, transformed into the epitome of sanity, peace, and purpose.

We're afraid, not because we would rather see the demonized man continue to harm himself—we're terrified because his transformation raises for us new possibilities for what it means to be human.

Many of Jesus' contemporaries were versed in the evocative poetry of the prophet Isaiah, with his enchanting vision of a future in which "the wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the young goat, and the calf and the lion and the fattened calf together; and a little child shall lead them" (Isaiah 11:6, *ESV*). It's why a song such as John Lennon's "Imagine" continues to resonate—it's lovely to daydream about a world no longer plagued by the threat of famine, violence, war, or death. As long as these visions exist as a distant utopian fantasy, a counterbalance to a good zombie yarn, they don't threaten us—but neither do they really inspire us.

In a world beleaguered by famine, violence, war, and death, it is far more shocking to see other people who were

once as haunted as we are no longer playing by the old rules. In a society in which it is more the norm than the exception for people to have conflicting centers of value and meaning inside their hearts and minds, it is much scarier to encounter people who are sane. If it is possible for one person to transcend the madness and become something other than he or she once was, then it is possible for all of us. And that means the future is no longer a speculative pipe dream. It means the future is upon us. The future is now.

In the life and ministry of Jesus, we see the wonder and chaos of the future breaking into the present. Before the resurrection of Jesus, the account of the Gerasene demoniac was an awful but beautiful foretaste of a new way to be human. We don't know the man's name—it could have been Bob or Phil or an Aramaic version of Kanye. What we do know is that his name was not Legion. He had a name assigned to him before the foundation of the world, a name he had lost touch with. And then, in the midst of his unending self-destructive behavior, in the midst of his round-the-clock angst, amid the pitiless darkness of the tombs, the power of God broke through and reestablished the man's name, his identity as one created in the image of the Father.

The boy on the bike

Let me tell you about the night I learned my own true name. Like any good Southern tale, this one is equal parts ghost story and tent revival testimony.

I grew up in what Flannery O'Connor called the "Christ-haunted landscape" of the American South, in the parsonage of a Pentecostal preacher. Many of the characters in my youth were as colorful as those who populate O'Connor's fiction.

We lived in the little town of Kannapolis, North Carolina, famous mostly for being the hometown of NASCAR legend Dale Earnhardt. I grew up playing church, holding my own little revival meetings with a full complement of superhero action figures. Superman preached the sermon; Aquaman, Robin, and Wonder Woman sang a trio for the special music; Hawkman got saved; and the Green Lantern got the Holy Ghost.

I was reared on a steady diet of apocalyptic stories—sermons and movies about the end of the world. At church one night, we watched *A Thief in the Night*, a B-movie holdover from the 1970s designed to scare us into following Jesus. The film tells the story of a young girl who comes home after school one day to find her parents missing, presumably taken up in the Rapture to go and be with Jesus. She is left to wander the earth alone during the reign of the Antichrist and his goons. It's a pretty dark film, leading up to a climactic scene in which the girl is given the opportunity to either accept "the mark of the beast" and lose her soul forever, or reject the mark and have her head lopped off at the guillotine.

When I was in second grade, my public school teacher showed our class a documentary about Nostradamus, the

sixteenth-century prognosticator who allegedly foretold modern disasters—from the French Revolution to the rise and fall of Adolf Hitler to the Kennedy assassination. Against an ominous background, with images of the Statue of Liberty being destroyed and New York City going up in a mushroom cloud, the narrator spoke calmly about the end of the world. According to the filmmakers, Nostradamus’s visions indicated an impending third world war—no brighter an outlook than that of John the Revelator, as seen through the lens of “biblical prophecy experts” such as Hal Lindsey and Jack Van Impe, who had written bestselling books about the end times. I could barely sleep many nights that year.

At eight years old, I remember asking my mother if we would die from radiation if the Russkies dropped a nuclear bomb on the city of Charlotte. I had enough sense to know they weren’t likely to go after Kannapolis. (Not everybody loved Dale Earnhardt, but that was no reason to wipe out our town.) But I thought Charlotte might be just a big enough target to put us in harm’s way. Needless to say, I was a pretty terrified little kid, prone to anxiety attacks from the middle of the day to the middle of the night.

The one escape I had from these apocalyptic fantasies was my blue-and-silver Schwinn bike. During those same years, I used to ride my bike for countless hours on the cul-de-sac at the end of our street. Instead of dwelling on the darker visions of the end of the world, I escaped into the realm of the truly fantastic—riding in circles for hours and making

up stories I would tell myself out loud. During these rides, I was unencumbered by fear, doubt, or self-consciousness, freely pursuing all the possibilities—and impossibilities—of life, without ever having to leave the neighborhood.

The neighbors probably thought I had some kind of psychosis, muttering to myself while never actually going anywhere. But I didn't care about getting to the end of the street or to another part of town; my little bike was my time machine. Just being on it made me capable of entering a world in which I had pet robots and saved really gorgeous blondes in futuristic jumpsuits from intergalactic danger. I wouldn't have thought of it in these terms back then, but I honestly believe that's where I came to know God. It was so natural to be in His presence that I wasn't even conscious of it.

I hadn't thought about any of that for almost twenty-five years, until one day when I was praying with my friend Jim Driscoll in my office. Far removed from the apocalyptic night terrors of my youth and the fanciful escapes on my bike, I was now leading a growing church, and it had been a very long time since I had even been on a bicycle, much less owned one. But while we were praying, I suddenly felt an "intensity" in the room—that's the best I can describe it—and Jim spoke words over me that I will never forget:

Jonathan, while I was praying for you, I saw you as a little boy riding your bike. You're riding around in circles, and you are talking to yourself—you are

making up stories out loud. There is so much freedom and creativity and imagination in you. You are completely free in the presence of God. I believe God is saying that is exactly who He wants you to become again. He wants you to be the boy on the bike again. He wants you to dream and laugh and create and be with Him the way you were when you rode in circles.

When I heard those words, I wept without restraint. In twenty-five years, I hadn't told *anyone* about those long-forgotten days riding my bike and making up stories—not even my wife, much less Jim. In the very core of my being, I knew that God was speaking to me. I just didn't know what to do with it.

Six months later, Amanda and I were on vacation with her family in Seabrook Island, South Carolina. When we left for the beach, I was overwhelmed by some difficult situations in our church and in my personal life. And because I was constantly tethered to my electronic gadgets—and everything that goes along with being “connected”—I couldn't find a way to escape.

On our first night at Seabrook Island, I decided to go for a bike ride. My in-laws had recently bought me a new bicycle, but I hadn't had the opportunity yet to ride it. It was around ten o'clock, and because there are no street-lights on the island, I went looking for a safely lit space to ride. Some nearby condos had a few lights along the perimeter of their property, and I decided that would do.

As I rode around in the parking lot, I was overcome by a familiar presence—as if suddenly I was no longer alone. It is difficult to describe, but I felt overwhelmed by the intensity of God’s love for me. I had not experienced Him quite like that before. Over and over again, I sensed Him reminding me that I was His beloved son—and that He loved me exactly as I was. It was not an out-of-body experience; yet it was as if my bike had become a time machine again—even more vividly than when I was in the second grade. For almost an hour, I was completely unaware of my surroundings or that tears were pouring down my face. When I finally realized that I had become a tearful, snotty, glorious mess, I composed myself and prepared to ride home. It was only then that Jim’s words came back to me.

Caught up in the moment, I hadn’t realized that I had been riding around in a circle for the entire hour. At that point, my weeping gave way to laughter, and I remember thinking, *God, I had no idea you were being quite so literal about this whole boy on the bike thing!* Even though, as a pastor, I had already preached to and counseled many people about how to have a relationship with God, I think it was the first time I had really come to know my own identity in Him.

When was your “boy on a bike” experience?

I don’t know if my story sounds too mystical for you, like one more religious leader trying to convince you that he hears from God. But as I’ve shared my story with friends,

I've discovered there is something elemental, something universal, about the “boy on the bike” experience—a time when we all have felt the most alive, the most awake to God and to the world, unconstrained by fear, doubt, or loneliness. For my friend Tracey, it was times of jumping on a trampoline as a girl. Another friend told me about a vivid, persistent image he saw in his mind's eye of himself as a young boy in a blue zip-up sleeper, brandishing a sword.

When I was on my blue-and-silver Schwinn as a boy, I believe I was aware of God in some primal way, though not because I was thinking a lot about Him directly. Mostly I was making up science fiction stories and telling them to myself out loud. But wrapped up in that experience was something essential, vital, visceral about my identity as a child of God.

Whether or not you are a boy on a bike or with a sword, or a girl on a trampoline, odds are there has been a moment in your life when you were filled with a sense of wonder and mystery at something outside of yourself. It doesn't have to be an experience that you felt was “spiritual” or “religious.” Simply a time when you were open and free to the world around you, or a time when you had a sense that there was something, or someone, drawing you close. Maybe you can even remember a time when you knew the sensation of being fully known and delighted in.

I believe there was a time in your life, sometime before you succumbed to the constant busyness, noise, and

distraction of our world, when you knew something of the loving presence of God. There was a time (perhaps associated with a place) when you knew—or at least suspected—that you were infinitely loved. In other words, I believe you have heard from God, and that you probably know a lot more about hearing from God than you might realize.

What if there is something to that faint suspicion in your heart that there is a force of love and logic at work in the universe, who knows who you are and what you are up to? That sense—however fleeting—that something, or someone, beyond you takes delight in who you are and how you are made? It's easy to dismiss such things as childish fantasy. After all, what did we really know about the world when we were eight? And yet, Jesus did teach that unless we “change and become like children,” we will not “enter the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 18:3). He wasn't saying that we need to be irrational, check our brains at the door, and hang on to naive fairy tales. But I think in a way He calls us back to that moment of wonder and mystery when we encountered God with the innocence of childhood.

The experience of God will always be trans-rational; it goes beyond our capacity to analyze or reason. For all the good things we've gained as we have grown, we've also picked up a lot of baggage that makes it difficult to remember the boy on the bike or the girl on the trampoline. When we were young and innocent, a bike could be a time machine, a trampoline could be a gateway into another dimension—just as a common wardrobe becomes

a doorway into another realm of existence in C. S. Lewis's *Chronicles of Narnia*.

You and I have lived with enough ambiguity and experienced enough pain since our younger days that it seems impossible to go back. But what if it were possible to return to those moments? What if we could go back to being the boy on the bike or the girl on the trampoline? We have more than enough reasons to settle for being older and wiser and weathered and seasoned and smarter—reasons to know better. But isn't there something in your heart that aches to go back and recapture that assurance? Doesn't it seem as if there's something truthful about those experiences that you can't quite shake? What if when you were younger and less encumbered by the expectations and identities that have been assigned to you by so many other voices, you understood deeper things about life and God and the world than you do now? Wouldn't that be worth going back for?

You might identify with the experience of being a boy on a bike or a girl on a trampoline and not associate anything you saw or felt then as "God." That's the beautiful thing about coming to faith. It's not about changing anything in your world—at least not at first. It's about coming to see the world that you already know, but in a new way. It's a new set of lenses and a new language, so that now when you look at the same world, you see something different, and you have a new vocabulary to describe familiar experiences.

It's not even so much about *finding* something new; it's more about *recognition*, about seeing things for the first time as they truly are. It's interesting how people who come to understand God's love for them often describe the feeling as a *homecoming*, even if they can't remember being "home" to begin with. There's a reason for this. Coming awake to God's infinite love can seem so foreign and yet feel as if it's where we've always belonged, because God, in His hovering delight, knows every boy on a bike and every girl on a trampoline. That sense of being known and delighted in stalks human beings the world over, even when we do everything in our power to act as if we do not know love.

What would it mean to believe that you already know something of the inner voice of love?³ What would it mean to start to listen to that voice? To give in to it? What if you really had a name before the cosmos existed? How would that change your approach to today?

Coming awake to God is nothing to be afraid of. It's not like doing something entirely different from anything you've ever done, or going somewhere you've never been. It's about coming home to who you really are. It's about becoming more yourself—more fully human—than ever.

This book is not about finding religion. It's not a self-help manual. I don't have seven habits or twelve steps to take you anywhere. This is about becoming *awake* to God. And if we become awake to God, we become awake to everything and everyone around us.

There are different ways to recognize God's voice. It may not be clear. It may not be loud. In fact, in my own experience, one of the things that sets apart the voice of God from all the other voices is that it is so often inconspicuous. You have to *listen* for it.

There is a beautiful story in 1 Kings 19 about the prophet Elijah at a time when he is on the run and desperate to encounter God. After he takes refuge in a cave on the side of a mountain, he is told to go outside because the presence of the Lord is about to pass by.

Then a great and powerful wind tore the mountains apart and shattered the rocks before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind. After the wind there was an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake came a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire. And after the fire came a gentle whisper. When Elijah heard it, he pulled his cloak over his face and went out and stood at the mouth of the cave. (1 Kings 19:11-13, NIV)

That's my hope for you as you read this book. Regardless of whether you find any of my words to be especially brilliant, poetic, or poignant, I want more than anything for you to hear the gentle whisper of God's voice. And though His voice may sound different to you than it does to me, I'm confident that you will recognize it.

Jesus as our prototype

Ever since that night on the bike at the beach, I've been learning more about who I am and who God is. I still get scared sometimes, and on occasion I'm an absolute wreck. There are plenty of things I don't like about myself and that you probably wouldn't like either. It seems weird to me to be a pastor, because I don't feel like I'm "together" enough—it's one of those "inmates running the asylum" kind of things. But ever since I discovered that I am the boy on the bike, I have learned more and more about what it means to be a beloved child of God. And in the best of moments, I see evidence that this revelation is turning me into somebody else—somebody more like Jesus.

Please understand, there are so many ways in which I am not yet at all like Jesus. But like Jesus, I now know my identity as God's beloved son. Like Jesus, I live with an awareness of God's presence that I didn't have before. Like Jesus, I'm now able to live unafraid of the future, because the future has already come barreling down on me. I'm learning to live more boldly, less fearfully, and less tentatively than I used to. I am more like a man from the future who is fully alive in the present.

As the sinless, only begotten Son of God—fully human and fully divine—Jesus is unique. I don't want to downplay any aspect of His character. But the fact that He could do extraordinary wonders is not what made Him so special. Even more than all the miracles, what set Jesus apart was

the deep understanding and trust He had that He was loved by God the Father.

Jesus was so certain of who He was and where He was going that of course He became a threat to the world around Him. He didn't need the affirmation of other people to know His true identity. What could possibly be more futuristic than that? Love made him free to be human in a way that nobody else before Him had been.

Many times in the Old Testament, God refers to human beings as His beloved. But when God called Jesus His beloved, Jesus did something truly remarkable: *He believed Him*. And He lived every moment of His life fully convinced of His identity.

And unlike every other person in human history . . . He never forgot.

The reason Jesus was such a threat to the religious authorities of His time was not that He went around teaching people to be nice to one another. The reason He was such a threat was that He showed us a new way to be human. That's why He ultimately had to be crucified—He was calling others into this new humanity, and it was dangerous for the social order of the day. And not just *His* day, but ours as well.

What if the ultimate goal of everything Jesus said and did was not just to get us to believe certain things about Him, but to *become* like Him? What if it were possible to become fully human in all the ways that Jesus was? What if Jesus were God's prototype for a whole new way of being human?

Because I'm a pastor, you would be right to assume that I think it matters a great deal what we think about Jesus. I'm quite partial to Jesus. I think it makes all the difference in the world to believe in Him. But what's interesting about believing *in* Jesus is that it has a whole lot to do with believing *like* Jesus—believing that you are beloved as a son or daughter of God; believing what God says about you, that you are the boy on the bike or the girl on the trampoline (or whatever your specific identity is), no matter what anyone else calls you.

Having discovered my rightful identity as God's beloved (aka the boy on the bike) has by no means straightened out everything in my life. But it has made my life much simpler. I now understand that knowing who God says we are and following Jesus into this new way of being human will change everything about our lives. The world is not ready for people like us. The world is not ready for a message like this—it is too futuristic. The world runs the way it does because we are people of the present—people with so much to do and so much to be afraid of. When we begin to live like Jesus, people will perceive our peace as an indictment on their violence; they will see our security as an indictment on their insecurity. It is a fearful thing to behold someone who is truly human in all the ways that Jesus said we could be—precisely because we have nothing left to be afraid of. We have already faced the future, so the future is not intimidating to us anymore.

In the coming pages, I want to show you how Jesus

prototype

came to be the prototype for this new way of being human. And I want you to discover (or reconnect with) your true self so you can begin the process of becoming more like Him. Though we may see ourselves as liars, dreamers, and misfits, I want to show you how we can unite as beloved children of God—people from the future who are fully alive in the present.