

“The Shore of Your Life” Rev. Michele Ward June 19, 2022

Galatians 3:23-39, Luke 8:26-39

Brown Memorial Park Avenue Presbyterian Church Baltimore, MD

The Gospel reading today comes from Luke. Listen now for a Word from God.

Then they arrived at the country of the Gerasenes, which is opposite Galilee. As he stepped out on land, a man of the city who had demons met him. For a long time he had worn no clothes, and he did not live in a house but in the tombs.

When he saw Jesus, he fell down before him and shouted at the top of his voice, "What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I beg you, do not torment me"--for Jesus had commanded the unclean spirit to come out of the man. (For many times it had seized him; he was kept under guard and bound with chains and shackles, but he would break the bonds and be driven by the demon into the wilds.)

Jesus then asked him, "What is your name?" He said, "Legion"; for many demons had entered him. They begged him not to order them to go back into the abyss. Now there on the hillside a large herd of swine was feeding; and the demons begged Jesus to let them enter these. So he gave them permission.

Then the demons came out of the man and entered the swine, and the herd rushed down the steep bank into the lake and was drowned. When the swineherds saw what had happened, they ran off and told it in the city and in the country.

Then people came out to see what had happened, and when they came to Jesus, they found the man from whom the demons had gone sitting at the feet of Jesus, clothed and in his right mind. And they were afraid.

Those who had seen it told them how the one who had been possessed by demons had been healed. Then all the people of the surrounding country of the Gerasenes asked Jesus to leave them; for they were seized with great fear. So he got into the boat and returned.

The man from whom the demons had gone begged that he might be with him; but Jesus sent him away, saying, "Return to your home, and declare how much God has done for you." So he went away, proclaiming throughout the city how much Jesus had done for him.

One: Hear what the Spirit is saying to the church.

All: Thanks be to God.

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On Juneteenth, the beginning of Baltimore Pride week, and Father’s Day, the lectionary gives us the story of the Gerasene demoniac. Luke chapter 8 is full of an intense array of teaching, healing, exorcism, and preaching. The encounter that we will explore this morning is overflowing with these moments and acts like an encapsulation of the entire chapter. In 13 verses, Jesus travels to the region of Gerasa. Based on the geography of the Sea of Galilee, the likeliest location of the “Miracle of the Swine” is an Israeli town in Golan Heights called Kursi, which means *chair* in Arabic. Kursi was a Gentile, non-Jewish area during the Roman Empire and later became the site of an early Byzantine monastery because of its holy significance.

But long before early Christians gathered here to pray, worship, and live together in Kursi, a completely nude man who lived among the tombs approached Jesus the moment he stepped out on land from the boat. Jesus had just come to shore after calming the storm on the Sea of Galilee and a significant amount of teaching. I have no idea what he was expecting when he disembarked, but I wonder if this moment caught him by surprise. The gospel tells us that demons possess the man. Jesus learns this quickly, too, as the man begins to shout at him, “Jesus, what have you done to me? Do not torture me, I beg you!” Jesus commands the unclean spirit(s) to leave the man alone, and it is the voice of his torturers Jesus hears rather than the man’s voice. The gospel narrative is scattered and reveals more details as the story unfolds. We now learn that the demons have seized the man so often that his community

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set up a prison for him. He had guards to watch over him, and he was bound with chains and with shackles. Because the demons would fill his body with significant strength, he was capable of breaking the chains and the shackles, and then flee further into the wilderness outside of town.

Only after Jesus initially tries to cast out the demon does he ask a question of introduction. “What is your name?” Jesus asks. The demons answer, “Legion,” because they had fully possessed the man in body and spirit. A legion is the largest Roman military grouping, and during the time of Christ included about 6,000 soldiers. To refer to oneself as Legion is to refer to oneself as the largest and strongest force of military might. This reference makes

The demons beg Jesus not to cast them out. They did not want to go back to what the gospel refers to as ‘the abyss,’ or ‘the pit,’ the place of darkness and damnation for the devil and the rest of the fallen angels that joined him in his rebellion against God. The bargain with Jesus, asking him to send them into the pigs instead. Jesus agrees to do this, and the demons enter the swine. The pigs go crazy and race to their deaths, stampeding into the Sea of Galilee and drowning. Apparently it is better to the demons to enter a pig and drown than be sent to the abyss directly by Jesus.

The swineherds are in shock. All of the time and money and work they have put into tending their herd - all of it is completely wasted. The herd has drowned. Their livelihood is gone. How will they explain this to their families and to the rest of the community? They go report what happened immediately in the countryside and in the town. Disbelieving this tall tale, crowds of people

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come out to the water’s edge to find the formerly possessed, continually naked, tomb dwelling man sitting at the feet of a strange Jewish man, wearing someone else’s clothes and carrying on a normal conversation. How would you respond if you saw someone you know behaving in a way entirely unlike the way you have seen them act other times? Rather than embrace him and celebrate his healing, they respond with total and complete fear. The swineherds told their story again, explaining what happened to the pigs and the way the demons left the man and entered them, killing themselves in the process. The people of the entire region asked Jesus to leave. They did not want anymore to do with this odd rabbi from across the Sea of Galilee. Luke tells us they ask him to leave out of “great fear.” Great fear! They are not grateful, excited, or inviting Jesus to stay and celebrate or heal more people. They want him to leave as quickly as possible.

Jesus did not put up a fight or try to convince them that they should appreciate his ministry among them or be thrilled at what God is doing in their midst. He gets back in his boat. And as he is about to leave, the healed man, the no longer naked man, the restored to his senses man begs Jesus to let him go with him. Now Jesus offers resistance. He tells the man that he cannot go with him on the boat, and that he needs to stay behind. Not because Jesus is cruel or vindictive, but because this man is now the only witness left to tell the story of what took place. Jesus commissions him to be an evangelist in his hometown. And so he does. The man spreads the news of his healing and the power of Jesus wherever he goes. Before Jesus healed him, he shouted the

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words of Legion. After Jesus healed him, he proclaims the words of miracle, the words of restoration, the words of life. Jesus sends him home to tell the good news. Rather than allow the man to join him and his disciples, he leaves him there in his hometown to spread the word of who Jesus is and the miracles he performs.

I'd like to go back to the crowd for a moment and reflect on them with you this morning. Keep in mind, Jesus has just decimated their local economy by killing the herd of swine. And, they figured out a way to contain the man possessed by demons, paying others to guard him and keeping him out of site among the tombs. The message they sent with the set up was very clear - no disruptions allowed. Our economy needs to keep moving, our way of life cannot be interrupted, and you need to stay put where we can control and dominate you. Then, Jesus shows up and turns everything upside down for the region of Gerasa. Rather than respond with excitement that their neighbor, friend, and relative has come back to them whole, healthy, and joyful, they are more upset about what Jesus represents and what the healing means.

Jesus brings change and with that change upends their socioeconomic system. Modern humans are not much better when confronted with change. Think about the way people respond to the idea that eating vegan is better for the human body and better for the climate. Or the way the general public reacts to trans students playing on sports teams. Even the way that the average white person responds when their neighborhood becomes more racially diverse. Human beings generally do not like change. We like things the way

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that they are. We cling to what we know, particularly if it gives us power. Even better if it gives us the illusion of control over our life and our circumstances.

I am here to remind us this morning that Jesus did not come to keep us comfortable. Jesus did not step out of the boat after calming the storm to simply pray for the man possessed by demons and not bring about any change in his life. Sometimes, radical healing requires radical change. Sometimes, radical healing requires an entire way of life, not simply for one person, but for the entire community, to take place. Sometimes, Jesus shows up in your life in order to dismantle your life for the better.

The miracle of communal wholeness takes work and is not easy. Jesus leaves us with no fantasies about the work ahead for the community of Gerasa. The gospel writer does not give us any clues about what happens after Jesus and the disciples leave the shoreline and head back out on to the Sea of Galilee. What we do know is that the man stays. He stays in his community, the one that chained him up in the tombs, leaving him for dead, the one they left unclothed like an animal, the one they shackled and guarded. He stays. He persists in their presence, the way he persisted through his demon possession, and now he proclaims the good news of healing. Like Jesus cast out his demons, Jesus can cast out their fear.

This Juneteenth, we celebrate the ending of slavery and the beginning of upending the slave economy. We celebrate the first Pride, which was a protest in the streets of New York led by the black trans community. We celebrate fathering and the way we care for one another in all sorts of ways. As we

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celebrate this myriad of relationships and this tearing down of oppressive systems, remember this. The God who brings about healing in this story, the God who confronts the fear of the community with the miracle of wholeness, is the same God who comes for you. The same God who claims you as their own, who comes to root out of your life whatever must be removed in order for Jesus to work through you, the same God who comes to take down systemic sin and transform the world around and within us. This is the Jesus who waits for you, who will pull up on the shore of your life at any moment.