

*St. John Lutheran Church*

*The Sermon*

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June 19, 2022

Luke 8:26-39

In the Gospel lesson for today, Jesus goes to a place nowhere near where God is not supposed to be, to a people, nowhere near the front of the line to see God, to a person who is beyond hope. In other words, he comes to you and me.

In the verses before the Gospel lesson for today, Jesus tells his disciples that it's time to cross the Sea of Galilee. So they get in the boat and they make their way across the sea, which is really a large lake, twelve miles long and eight miles wide.

Since ancient times, a boat or ship has represented the church, the community of people who believe in Jesus. So Jesus calls us also, to cross boundaries, cross lakes and seas, to go to places where God is not supposed to be, to be a part of God's work among people who are different from what we are used to, who think differently and act differently, who may speak a different language, or even if they speak our language, may speak it with an accent to which we are unaccustomed. He calls us to go to places other than East Louisville, other than our middle class situations.

Jesus calls us to go to the land of the Gentiles.

And as is often the case when we as a community of faith reach out, there is trouble. There are waves. "Pastor, why can't they just learn our language. Why can't they just talk like us? Why can't they just be like us?"

Sometimes the waves can get so high that it scares us. In the verses before the Gospel lesson for today, for example, there is a storm. The disciples are afraid that they are going to sink, to die. Sometimes, I think we are afraid. We think, "Not as many

people come to church as did years ago, maybe we will have to close.” Sometimes we might even think that Christianity itself is in danger, that there are persecutions brewing. Christianity no longer holds the position of prominence and status that it once held in our culture.

Scary storms. And where is Jesus in this story? Is Jesus standing on the prow of the boat, shining in his bright robes, filling his followers with courage and confidence as they forge ahead into the storm? No. He’s not. He is sleeping in the back of the boat. Jesus seems to be disengaged, unconcerned with the church’s problems. The disciples come to Jesus and say, “Lord, we are perishing.” Jesus wakes up and says, “Where is your faith?”

Because we are the church. We are a people of the cross, a people of hope. We believe in a power greater than the storm. We believe that goodness is stronger than evil, love is stronger than hate, light is stronger than darkness, life is stronger than death, that Jesus is risen from the dead. That’s what we believe. That’s our faith.

Jesus stands up, calms the storm. And the disciples in their little boat make it to the far shore, to the land of the Gerasenes, Gentile territory.

Who confronts Jesus, as soon as they get there? It’s a crazy man. An insane person. He runs around without any cloths on, not a stitch. This man is beyond hope. There is no hope for him.

People try to restrain him to keep him from hurting himself and others. He breaks the chains and goes howling off into the hills. He lives among the tombs, where death seems to be the winner; where those who wield the power of death in their hands seem to wield the power of God. Because, after all, what is there beyond the grave?

You ever feel that way? Like you’re living among the tombs, like there’s no hope.

Do you ever feel that way? Like there’s no hope?

I hear people say that there’s no hope. I observe that we’ve got over 800 million people in the world who can’t get enough to eat, and that for the first time in history we have the ability to feed everyone, if we are willing to work together as nations. But it’s hopeless. The economic system just isn’t set up that way. It will never happen.

We see tyrants trying to mold reality to fit their own lies. We say it's hopeless. The military and political realities won't allow it. They will get away with it.

We see vast gaps between the rich and poor. Deep inequities between the fortunes of people who are Black, White, Latin, Asian, Native Peoples and others. We say, "it's hopeless, it's too complex."

We look at our own lives, our finances, our families, the whirlwind or the dead depression going on in our own heads. We say it's hopeless.

It's like we're running around naked, powerless. People try to restrain us, to keep us from hurting others and ourselves, we break the chains and run howling off into the hills. We live among the tombs, in places where it seems death has won, and that those who wield the power of death wield the power of God.

We say, Jesus, why do you torment us, with your insistence that we can feed each other, that we can stand up to tyranny, that we can live in equity and respect and peace? Why do you keep bothering us? Our hopelessness is comfortable, familiar.

Jesus says, "What is your name? Do we tell him our name? No we do not. Do we even remember our names? John, Mary, Aochi? Not really. What is our name, the name we received at the dawn of time, what we are at the core of our being? We were made in the image of God at the dawn of time. That's our name. Image of God. We are restored to that name every day by the cross of Jesus. But do we remember that? No.

Jesus says, "What is your name?" We say, "Legion." Because the demons are so many.

Back in Bible times, people would have heard this word, "Legion," and they would have said, "Oh my God, did it just say what I think it said?" "Legion" was a unit of the Roman army, over 6,000 soldiers. These were the people that if you spoke out against them, they would crucify you and leave you hanging by the side of the road for days and days till you were dead.

The Gospel lesson for today says, "Ha ha, ha," the legion as asked to go into the pigs, unclean animals. For us, it would be as if the forces of economics and finances,

inflation and inequity, tyranny and politics, lies and racism, as if those forces asked, begged to be allowed to flee into a pack of rats, a swarm of cockroaches.

And then the swarm of cockroaches leaps into the sea, and is washed away. The demons are washed away, just as our demons are washed away again and again every day in Baptism.

And now, we sit, clothed, at last in our right minds, at last, free, at the feet of Jesus, that is, in the place of a student, in the place of someone who is always learning something new.

Isn't it a fine thing to be free?

I wish I could end the story there, with a happy ending. But I can't give you a happy ending today. I can give you a hopeful ending, but not happy.

The people of that country are terrified of Jesus. He has threatened their economy. All those pigs were worth some money. He has also shown that there is a power greater than Rome. Jesus will require changes to our priorities, our economics, our politics. Those changes aren't easy. So they ask Jesus to go away.

People will be scared of our witness, that goodness is stronger than evil, love is stronger than hate, light is stronger than darkness, life is stronger than death, that Jesus is risen. People will be afraid.

The man asks that he be allowed to go away with Jesus, but Jesus says "No." Instead, our job is to stay, and share the power of God, to be a part of the healing of God in our world, to show what God has done for us. This is not going to be easy: to be free in a world that is possessed by demons. It's not easy. But it's hopeful. And that's what we are, a people of hope. Thanks be to God.