

Sermon - June 19, 2019, Rev. Dr. Jessica McArdle

Divinely inspired, the Bible contains among other things: poetry, proverbs, prophecy, numerous letters along with a recounting of events that record people's encounter with the living God. Yet the Bible is also a historical book, crafted in antiquity.

The passage from the Gospel of Luke that Jane read earlier, is an account repeated in Mark as well as Matthew. While there are slight variations between these three accounts, they all agree on a basic outline or summary. It goes as follows: Accompanied by his disciples, Jesus crosses over the Sea of Galilee to the other side, to a place recorded by Luke as Gerasenes. Yet just after they get out of the boat, Jesus and his disciples are confronted by a deranged man bound in chains and naked, having been kept isolated by the community away in a cemetery. So wild is this man's behavior, even the chains used to restrain him fail.

Though in the throes of demonic possession, nevertheless the malevolent forces within this man recognize Jesus for who he really is, the Son of the Most-High. That's when Jesus asks the demonic presence what *their* name is. Which provides a clue that there is more to this story than what the original writers disclosed.

For when the Son of the Most High asks the name of the demonic presence, it answers, Legion. As suggested by biblical scholars, the word legion as used here, wasn't referring to a vast sum of demonic personages as was it directing the reader's attention to an actual Roman Legion. During the time of Rome, a Roman Legion was a significant and formidable sized force consisting anywhere from 4,000 to 6,000 combat ready soldiers deployed for conquest and when necessary, to pursue complete annihilation.

Some thirty plus years after Jesus' death, around about 66 AD, was an interval when much of the New Testament was written. But what also transpired during this pivotal period was the Jewish revolt. As recorded by Josephus, a historian who lived during that period: longtime occupation, gross economic injustice between the privileged Jewish class and those on the lower rungs

combined with internal factions within the Jewish population itself was what led to the bloody conflict. And the site where the first rebellion took place, followed by a fierce crackdown and savage carnage committed by the Roman Legion, was none other than Gerasenes.

Thus, today's text presents us with a question, one within scripture itself and as mirrored in the world. "Is this passage just about Jesus healing a man in the grips of a maniacal possession? Or is this account speaking to us at a deeper level, directing our attention to the upheaval within ourselves and our world?"

Writes one*, "Sometimes the fear we live with is more tolerable than the peace we can't imagine."

Today is also Juneteenth. Juneteenth, or the 19th of June, commemorates what occurred in Galveston, Texas on June 19, 1865. Two and half years earlier, Abraham Lincoln had enacted the Emancipation Proclamation – freeing all those enslaved. However, many slaveowners in the south headed west for Texas given the absence of Union soldiers there, thereby denying thousands of enslaved people the freedom that the Emancipation Proclamation had granted them. Perhaps the crueler irony is that the bitter narrative of slavery and Jim Crow and Juneteenth continue to be repressed in many corners. History has a way of repeating itself.

"Sometimes the fear we know is more is more tolerable than the peace we can't imagine."

Towards the end of today's scripture reading AND after Jesus had fully rehabilitated the man, the town folk insisted he leave. Previously, the possessed man had been deranged, even violent. Now he was calm, centered and fully restored. Yet the people were even more fearful of his sanity and equanimity than they were of his violent behavior.

Just prior to his arrest, Jesus said these words to his disciples when seeking to console them given his imminent death. He said, "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. But the peace I give is not as the world gives."

When speaking of the peace that the world offers, there is the peace of the empire...as the uneasy peace that ancient Rome offered, Pax Romana. By crushing

opposition, ancient Rome could impose the terms of peace on its dominions.

Though it provided economic security and safety from invading forces, it was also an anxious peace, a peace enforced through violence.

Yet Jesus said, “My peace I leave with you. My peace I give to you. But the peace I give is not as the world gives.”

Writes, preacher and blogger, *Evan Garner, “Along with its connection to Rome’s oppression, today’s passage draws our attention to how the town people reacted. After Jesus heals the man and breaks the bonds of oppression, the people in the town are now even more afraid. What they’ve tried to contain and control and keep quiet all these years, has now been unleashed. So, they ask Jesus to leave, thereby revealing a preference for the shackles of empire over the freedom of God’s imminent reign. Indeed, it is tempting to maintain our allegiance to the lesser powers that *threaten us* rather than embrace the overwhelming power that *liberates us*.”

This is the Season of Pentecost, when we recall the Spirit of the Living God inflaming those overcome by fear. Christ beseeches us, asking, “Must we remain beholden to fear?” The Beloved One of God asks us, “Must we play it safe so that we don’t offend anyone?” The Most-High asks, “Must we habitually turn a blind eye to the least of these who cry out?” Instead, envision this my friends. Imagine if the tongues of fire and gathering winds infusing those gathered on the Day of Pentecost so long ago – became wholly evident in our own lives? What then?

Friends in Christ, let us be resolved, right here, today, to seize upon this peace – a peace not as the world gives – but as Christ offers us. A peace that sees beauty in a refugee child’s face; a peace that delights in the laughter of one released from incarceration; a peace that labors for those on the margins; a peace that supports the courageous work of unleashing the truth, however painful; a peace that sees God’s imprint in everything. A peace not as the world gives, but one that the Son of the Most-High lavishly offers us, even in the darkest of times.

Thanks be to God. Amen.