

Year C 2019
Pentecost 2
Luke 8.26-39

Last Sermon at St. Francis-in-the-Wood by Rev. Janice Lowell

Our Gospel this morning continues the theme of Jesus' ministry to an outsider. Outsiders are always among us and not always where we might expect. In the late 70's and early 80's, Bob Dylan had a conversion experience and released two gospel albums. On concert tours, when he began to sing these songs he was heckled. He fell out of favour with the pop music industry and became an outsider for some years.

"I Believe" is a lament in the face of one's adversaries and a song of conviction. There are times when this could have also been my psalm, especially as I reflect on my journey that led me to the ordained priesthood.

They ask me how I feel
And if my love is real
And how I know I'll make it through
And they, they look at me and frown
They'd like to drive me from this town
They don't want me around
'Cause I believe in You

They show me to the door
They say don't come back no more
'Cause I don't be like they'd like me to
And I, I walk out on my own
A thousand miles from home
But I don't feel alone
'Cause I believe in You

I believe in You even through the tears and the laughter
I believe in You even though we be apart
I believe in You even on the morning after
[this is a reference to the resurrection]
Oh, when the dawn is nearing
Oh, when the night is disappearing
Oh, this feeling is still here in my heart

Don't let me drift too far
Keep me where You are

Where I will always be renewed
And that which You've given me today
Is worth more than I could pay
And no matter what they say
I believe in You

I believe in You when winter turns to summer
I believe in You when white turn to black
I believe in You even though I be outnumbered
Oh, though the earth may shake me
Oh, though my friends forsake me
Oh, even that couldn't make me go back

Don't let me change my heart
Keep me set apart
From all the plans they do pursue
And I, I don't mind the pain
Don't mind the driving rain
I know I will sustain
'Cause I believe in You.

The demon-possessed person in our Gospel is also an outsider, an "other." That exclusionary term that separates us one from another and so often leaves the outsider alone and in despair. Jesus reveals his power to rescue lives from misery. The man of our story is possessed by demons - the ultimate outcast. Was he already considered dead – a non-living person? He is an exile from his community and so feared that he was often bound by shackles and kept under guard. His life is barren and not his own.

When Jesus asks him his name, he replies, "Legion," indicating that he was oppressed by too many demons to count. He has lost himself in the cacophony of their voices and has ceased being himself, an individual, or a person. I wonder if any of us have been similarly overwhelmed by the voices raging at us from inside and out, denigrating our identity and driving us to places of extreme loneliness or despair?

The metaphorical desert is such a place but if one goes there to be rid of all the problems in one's life, I wonder if it is a waste of time. Perhaps it would be better to go for a total confrontation with oneself - to see more and to see

better; to take a closer look at the things and people one would rather not see, to face situations one would rather avoid, and to answer questions one would rather forget. The journey through the desert is confrontation with whatever keeps us from being fully alive.

The ancients regarded all illness as the result of the power of evil. It was also part of ancient beliefs that demons that are exorcised do not simply evaporate, but actually look for a place to rest. Left to their own power, they choose their next "host," and so the pigs become their new dwelling place.

The transformation of the young man epitomizes the theme of reversal. This man is one of the many of those lost who discover wholeness in Jesus. The one who was homeless now has a home. No one is beyond reach of Christ's redeeming, healing love. This story relates Jesus' healing as affecting a restoration of an individual's identity and their capacity for serenity and joy.

Rather than recognizing and celebrating the God-given good fortune of their neighbor, the people of the surrounding countryside are struck with fear. They are not overjoyed at Jesus' healing; they are afraid and ask him to leave. I wonder how the owners of the herds of swine felt. Was there perhaps fear mixed with hostility? Jesus had indirectly taken away their livelihood - their loss is catastrophic.

Christian presence and power disrupts the social and financial order of communities. This creates upheaval and hostility among those whose financial world is shaken by the impact of the gospel. The good news does not always seem so good to everyone. I wonder, if in this instance, that old demon greed freed himself from the swine and found its way into the community. We often prefer the devil we know to the freedom we do not.

The location of this story, itself, is not accidental. The "country of the Gerasenes, which is opposite Galilee" is Gentile territory. We have here a precursor of the larger Gentile mission to come. This story reminds me of our reading from three weeks ago. Paul casts the demon out of the young slave girl. Paul is disrupting the livelihood of her owners in Philippi. This story plays out in many of Paul's travels. In Ephesus and Corinth, the converts are no

longer buying or producing items for sacrifice to the Roman gods. Their economy is threatened, and so uprisings are coordinated, Paul is brought before the authorities and lands in jail.

At the conclusion of the reading, the healed man wants to join Jesus in his mission. I can well imagine his longing to remain with Jesus? While some disciples accompany Jesus in his itinerant life, others share his ministry at home. Home is where the impact of his healing will be most dramatic – among people who knew him as the possessed, naked, shouting man in the tombs. The one who experienced the power of the kingdom now announces the kingdom to others. This nameless man becomes the 1st missionary to the gentiles.

Our commission is to work towards bringing this healing and liberating love of God to broken and desolate regions, to those whose lives are bound by demonic forces they cannot control - political prisoners, refugees, those with addictions, mental illness, incurable diseases, victims of financial ruin, terror, trauma, and abuse. Legions of stupidities and our penchant for unending violence bring the world to the edge of apocalypse. Human folly, greed, lack of imagination, graft arrogance – our character failings trip over themselves to outdo each other to join the self-destructive war, adding up to a legion of madnesses which occupy us like a garrison of ignorance.

Christianity is not for the faint-hearted. It takes great courage and self-examination. And yet, we have many examples of people who have done just that and advocated for the “others” among us. Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. paid with their lives and Nelson Mandela paid with years of imprisonment.

For several years, people strayed away from Dylan and his music. He was not welcome because of his affliction of being labelled a ‘born-again Christian.’ I find it ironically delicious that in 2016, he was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature.

There have been times when I, too, have felt like an outsider here. Why? Because my passion has been to create space where people can connect

with the Living God in a profoundly deeper way. I thank God for Godly Play, Messy Church, the Wednesday Morning Bible Study, the Rector's theological hot tub, Women on a Journey and the Women's Retreats. The struggle and joy in what it means to be a true follower of Jesus are found in these ministries. I highly recommend them.

When I hear people say they don't want to go deeper, my heart breaks. When I attend Vestry meetings and the conversation is dominated by finances, my heart breaks. When I only hear God's name at Vestry during opening and closing prayers, my heart breaks. But isn't about me; it's about God. And I sometimes wonder if God has cracked open hearts and let the Light and Love in. I hope the story of the Geresene demoniac may open any personal wounds that need air, light, and exposure to the painful healing that can be transformed into holiness and wholeness.

I believe that whatever has pained this community is being healed and transformed. There are parishioners who give of their time to sponsor a person in recovery, to walk for water, to sponsor refugees, to visit lonely parishioners who are housebound, to lay hands for healing, who share the Good News with our children and the list goes on. We have a rector who goes forth like the disciples and shares the Good News of Mark and John in ways that make the stories come alive.

To be baptized with Jesus is to commit to going to the opposite side, regardless of cost. And there is a cost of time, energy and resources in being a follower of Christ. God promises that we are never alone in our ministries of being agents of healing and wholeness to others and the world.

Upon my leaving, I have hope in "God's Dream for St. Francis." Sometimes it is easier for me to say this in verse.

Magical worship place in the Wood,
surrounded by nature.
Windows honouring creation
and our patron saint.

How could anyone stray from God
in this idyllic setting?
We all can. We are human.

This place has been showered with God's gifts
of music, art, gardening, singing, preaching, teaching,
healing, hospitality, caring for one another, wisdom, service.
We have it all!
And yet, we are not a business.
We are God's business and God calls us into a new reality
that is in the world but not of the world.

If we believe that God has called us here,
then let us give thanksgiving.
Not simply with money,
even though that is also important.
God gave us stewardship over this place,
and it is right to care for it.

But beyond the building lies God's world.
When we look around, all seems well and much is.
But look with God's eyes,
at the abundance in the world
and the poverty of spirit.
Listen with God's ears
when others speak their truth.
Think with God's thoughts.
Who is God calling us to be?
Tap into God's imagination!

God has richly blessed this place,
and God wants extravagant blessings from us.
Extravagant love for one another,
the community and the world.
Extravagant forgiveness
for those we feel have wounded us.
Extravagant celebration and protection of God's creation.
Extravagant feasting at God's table
and when we celebrate as family.
Extravagant healing that God is waiting to be asked for.
Each person here matters.
Each person is a beloved child of God.
Each person is worthy of love, forgiveness,
healing, wholeness and deep listening.

But this is hard work!

This is God's work!
God will equip us
when we spend time alone with God;
when we pray for ourselves and our neighbors;
when we move out of our comfort zone.

God has a dream!
And we are part of it.
Dream with God.
Celebrate life and one another.
Be mindful.
And love, always love.

These are my leaving words and blessing for you.
May they resonate in your mind, heart and spirit.
And the people said, "Amen!"