

Second Sunday After Pentecost

Wicker Park Lutheran Church

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June 23, 2019

We are, finally, back in the gospel of Luke! And, we start off with a busy story. I think, the key to understanding it, is to look at the context. Now, directly before today's story, Jesus decided to go to the other side of the lake – a place that was not Jewish (and remember, Jesus is Jewish) and a place that was probably unknown to him. So, Jesus was in the boat with his disciples, and after a storm raged, Jesus calmed the storm. That scene ends with the disciples asking each other, “Who then is this, that he commands even the winds and the water, and they obey him?” (Luke 8:25). This question about Jesus's identity is what frames today's reading.

So, we begin today's episode after Jesus and his disciples finished their journey. They stumbled upon a man, but not just any man, rather, a man who was demon-possessed with not with a single demon but, as the name “Legion” describes, around 6,000 demons. His life, as Dr. David Lose describes it, is utterly bleak. He is “completely dominated by what has mastered him, unable to restrain himself or be restrained, naked and alone, we discover he is also homeless, abandoned, and lives among the tombs, that is, among the dead, in a wasteland, in territory considered unclean, unsafe, and unapproachable.”¹

That man's experience is all too familiar, even if we don't use the word “demon.” Many, if not all of us, find ourselves metaphorically living in tombs and in painful places that we experience as death. For some, it's a controlling addiction or diagnosis

¹ <http://www.davidlose.net/2019/06/pentecost-2-c-inviting-out-of-the-tombs/>

that even the chains of a treatment plan cannot restrain. Others are dominated by the memories of war, abuse, or trauma that continually thrust you among the tombs. Sometimes it's social and economic forces that threaten or force you toward or into cycles of poverty and homelessness. What about the tombs that we force people into because of the inhumane treatment perpetuated on our behalf for those wrongfully incarcerated, or the cages we place children into who are seeking refuge from the violence in their home country, or the ways we take cheap and needed labor from an undocumented immigrant while society deems them unsafe and expendable? And, for you, it could be how mental illness takes hold of daily life with its whirling thoughts paired with stigma and misunderstanding that make living among the tombs not only a way of life but even, a needed way to survive.² For you, it could be that little voice in your head that tells you that you aren't successful enough, aren't good enough, not rich enough, not sexy enough, not young enough, not old enough, not white enough, and not skilled enough to be loved, valued, and alive. So, no, we may not be literally naked and living in a tomb, but, friends, together, you and I, we are both individually and communally lurking among the dead.

And, that is where Jesus enters. Remember, it was mainly happenstance that he got in a boat and went to the other side.³ There was no good reason for the trip. They weren't going on summer vacation or passing through to another destination. There was no clear plan or purpose, just a desire to cross from the familiar to the unfamiliar, from Galilee to Gerasene, and from status quo to salvation. There, Jesus took the thousands of the things that oppressed and tormented that man and sent them into the sea.

² <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=5358>

³ This portion is deeply influenced by: <http://www.davidlose.net/2019/06/pentecost-2-c-inviting-out-of-the-tombs/>

But, instead of rejoicing or even decrying the economic impact of killing all the pigs, the swineherds and people of the town were overcome with fear and sent Jesus away. And, that's always intrigued me about today's story. Why would those people who watched this tormented man and who probably tried to restrain him with those shackles react with such fear? The story doesn't give us an answer, but we know how fear works. In fact, fear is probably one of the demons that possessed that man. Fear can be that voice that preserves status quo at any cost. Fear can make us reject life-giving change for what has become a familiar tomb. Fear can easily become our Lord and supposed savior. So too, this changed man now forced the townspeople to wrestle with their own demons. For, after this man with God's power engaged in the uncomfortable work of transforming tombs into true life, the only thing left is for the townspeople to do their own uncomfortable work.

And, you and I, we see this all the time. Like, once an incarcerated person returns to our communities, we often don't rejoice and restore them to the community; instead, we fear them. We fear that they might not have actually changed, but we also fear the work we will have to do to understand them as a new person, we fear that our preconceived judgments may not be accurate, and we fear that we might have to accept our infallibility. We fear that our laws and policies might have to change when we realize the reasons why that human was inhumanely caged. We fear that we might actually have to address the root causes of violence, immigration, theft, drug abuse, mental health, mass incarceration, and a slow-moving judicial system. So, in the midst of our fear, it's much easier to send away the liberator and find ways to avoid what God has done with distractions in our own dark tombs.

But, we have a God that isn't controlled by fear. We have a God who came among us in human form, as Jesus, to explicitly "bring good news to the poor," "bring release to

the captives and recovery of the sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." (Luke 4:18-19) We have a God who for seemingly no good reason took a trip across the sea to liberate that man. We have a God who, for seemingly no good reason, liberates our thinking, being, and doing, so that we trade our tombs for a home among God's people. We have a God who, for seemingly no good reason, weathers the storms of life and sends our demons away. We have a God who, for seemingly no good reason, comes to us at that font and at this table to remind us and strengthen us.

We have a God who, for one exceptionally good reason, comes to you and me every day and that reason is love. For, our God knows that tomb living is not real living. Instead, we have the opportunity to truly understand the love we've been given, the value we have as God's child, and the success we find in being truth-seekers and radical-lovers. And the rest of our existence, that is for the corpses.

So, friends, there it is. Today, we are reminded that our God is revealed in transforming humanity from tomb-dwellers into seekers of transformation. Our God moves from familiarity into the unknown to show love and liberation to all. So too, we, like that tormented man, are invited to join in God's action to share the love we've received, to work to liberate all people from their tombs, and to notice God's presence in the least likely of places. Amen.