

Demons & Pigs

When we were together last Sunday, we had scarcely had time to absorb the news of the latest mass murder in the United States, this one just a few miles from “The Happiest Place on Earth.” I might have been able to put together a coherent response from the pulpit if I’d had to but frankly, it wasn’t the right day for that. Last Sunday was a time to celebrate each other, one of those rare days when we feel OK about turning our eyes primarily inward to the joys of our little community and leaving the troubles of the world behind for an hour or two. So the tragedy was mentioned but not dwelt upon and I made myself a silent promise that I would find a way to properly address the shock, sorrow, and outrage that was beginning to swell all around us.

I had forgotten that the passages I had chosen from the lectionary for this morning leant themselves so well to a discussion of our nation’s addiction to violence and death. It is another of those beautiful instances of being led in a certain direction in my advance planning only to find that a choice I made weeks or months before is suddenly spot on for the day. Some would call it coincidence but for a long while I have defined that word as God acting anonymously. As the Church continues to count its Sundays this season in our journey out from Pentecost, I can only attribute this synchronicity of planning and event to the work of the Holy Spirit. And I hope that you, like me, will hear the whispers of the Spirit not only in the words of challenge which we will explore this morning but also in the words of comfort. Finally, beyond all human sin and systemic evil, our Loving Creator stands with open arms, seeking, calling, forgiving us.

Let’s begin by examining those Scripture passages and looking for the truths that would have been heard in them by their earliest audiences; first, with Isaiah. In its place at the beginning of the penultimate chapter of the Isaian collection, Isaiah 65:1-9 is a part of what many scholars refer to as Third Isaiah, the portion of the book written following the return of the exiles from Babylon to Judah. The flush of joy over their return has long since been tempered by the harsh realities on the ground – the necessity to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem, the impoverished look of the Second Temple, the resistance to their work and even their presence from their neighbors and even from some of those left behind by the Babylonians. God has not returned in glory. A son of David does not occupy the throne. Something is rotten in Judah.

The word of the prophet is that the fault lies in the people themselves. Whatever their intentions upon their return to the Promised Land, they have once again begun to drift away from adherence to the covenant made with Yahweh. “Sacrificing in gardens and offering incense on bricks” is not only a failure to utilize the rebuilt Temple but a clear indication that gods other than the God of Abraham and Sarah are being worshipped. The people are “(sitting) inside tombs, and (spending) the night in secret places” because they are attempting to communicate with the dead, another clear violation of God’s rules for their living. By consuming pork and other “abominable things,” they have forsaken even the most basic dietary rules that separated them out from the other nations as the people with a special calling from God. Nevertheless, they continued to hold themselves in pride as they encountered their neighbors: “Keep to yourself, do not come near me, for I am too holy for you.” We still use this last as the mark of inordinate spiritual pride – you may remember the phrase from the old King James Version: “I am holier than thou.”

In just a few words, the prophet has given us the picture of a people causing deep offence to God; a people deserving of punishment. And yet, Yahweh continues to reach out, to love, and to

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forgive. The passage opens with God's aching heart: "I was ready to be sought out by those who did not ask, to be found by those who did not seek me. I said, "Here I am, here I am," to a nation that did not call on my name. I held out my hands all day long to a rebellious people, who walk in a way that is not good, following their own devices..." God's word to the prophet likens the people to a bunch of grapes, not destroyed for the hope of the good wine that may come. Their actions will have consequences but still the promise of ultimate inheritance remains.

In our Gospel reading for the morning, we find the continuation of Luke's effort to set forth "the truth concerning the things about which you have been instructed;" namely, the identity of Jesus of Nazareth as the Son of God and Messiah of Israel. In the passage immediately preceding this story, Jesus has set out across the Sea of Galilee with his disciples in their fishing boat. On the way, they encounter a storm and the terrified disciples waken the sleeping Jesus who calms the wind and waves. As Luke tells it, "They were afraid and amazed, and said to one another, 'Who then is this, that he commands even the winds and the water, and they obey him?'" As any good Jew could have told you, the sea was beyond the control of humankind – only God was master of the waves and wind.

Our story proper opens then on the other side of the sea – the Gentile side. Like the picture of God in Isaiah, Jesus is "ready to be sought out by those who did not ask," holding out hands of blessing to those who never worshipped the God of Israel. He immediately encounters a man who seems the very embodiment of what Torah calls "uncleanness," some of the features called out in our Isaian verses: he is possessed by demons, he goes naked in public, and lives in the tombs that righteous Jews shunned, not far from a feeding ground for pigs.

I want to pause in our study of Luke for just a moment to say a few words about pigs. If your only exposure to swine is cute little piglets or potbellied pigs kept as pets or the smiling and friendly images of Porky and Petunia Pig, the eponymously named Pig of "Pearls Before Swine" or whatever that pig's name is at the ubiquitous southern grocery store, Piggly Wiggly, you may think that the fate of the herd of swine in this story is awfully harsh. But pigs, of course, were considered unclean by the Jews. Reasons for this remain somewhat vague. Some attribute Torah's ban on pork to the notion that pigs were held to be sacred by Israel's neighboring tribes and were therefore off-limits to the worshippers of Yahweh. Others point to the notorious danger of disease from eating undercooked pork. And then there is the undeniable fact that pigs are dirty, sleeping in, rooting in, and even eating their own excrement. Pigs are also dangerous. Because they are rarely found in the wild in this country, we forget that wild boars were the terror of many ancient and medieval villages. Wild boars, like the one pictured on the front of your bulletin or as caricatured by the University of Arkansas for their Razorback mascot, are possessed of large and effective tusks and teeth. They are bad tempered and will eat anything, including unwary humans. I still remember walking to a neighbor's farm with my uncle in Arkansas when I was a young boy and being warned away from the hog pen. "Stay away from them hogs, Chris," I was told. "If you fall in there the big ones will eat you." I was right to heed the warning. A quick check of Google will give you multiple stories from reputable news outlets about recent cases of humans being devoured by pigs. Bacon may taste good to us but we apparently taste pretty good to pigs, too.

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I'll come back to pigs in a moment. Meanwhile, back to Luke. Jesus is recognized by the many demons inhabiting the unfortunate man for who he is, "Son of the Most High God." They plead with him to be allowed to go into the nearby pigs rather than be cast into the void and Jesus agrees. The swine, unpredictable creatures that they are, are driven mad and run headlong into the sea where they are drowned and the demons destroyed. The people of the town, alerted by the swineherd that something unusual is happening, come out to find the former demoniac, whom they've given up as a lost cause, clothed and in his right mind and sitting at the feet of Jesus. Whether it is through anger at their lost property (the pigs) or through fear of what someone who could cure the madman might do next, they ask Jesus to get back in his boat and go back where he came from, which he prepares to do. But the recently cured man wants to come with him and Jesus has other ideas. Listen carefully to how Luke phrases Jesus' instructions to the man and the man's subsequent actions: "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." There is no doubt in this Gentile's mind about who he has encountered.

And now, from exegesis to eisegesis: from what I can discern the Scriptures saying in their context to my understanding of how they apply in our context. I am haunted by the spectre of violence in the story of the man possessed by Legion. There are only hints of this violence in Luke; the violence inherent in the story is more plain in the tellings of Mark and Matthew. Here in Luke, we are told that the man is capable of breaking chains and shackles and escaping from guard to be driven into the tombs. The Markan account, from which Luke was likely working, makes the violence of the situation more overt: "He lived among the tombs; and no one could restrain him any more, even with a chain; for he had often been restrained with shackles and chains, but the chains he wrenched apart, and the shackles he broke in pieces; and no one had the strength to subdue him. Night and day among the tombs and on the mountains he was always howling and bruising himself with stones." In Matthew's version, there are actually two demoniacs: "They were so fierce that no one could pass that way." My sense of violence is enhanced by my knowledge of pigs and the fact that Legion seems to think that the swine will be congenial hosts. Of course, their end is violent, too.

It is evident to me that our nation has been possessed by the unclean spirit of violence. From the time that our Euro forebears landed on these shores and began the systematic dispossession and slaughter of the indigenous peoples, to the waxing and waning of the "peculiar institution" of slavery which snatched men, women, and children from their native land and shackled them with chains they could not break even when slavery was abolished only to be continued by Jim Crow and mass incarceration and the daily bland hatred called racism, to our current status as the enforcer of the will of the wealthy around the globe and supplier of weapons to all comers, foreign and domestic, the United States of America has been and remains in the grip of the most violent spirits imaginable. Even our most popular sport, coincidentally played with the inflated skin of a pig, is being unmasked as a slow killer of athletes whose brains are battered during its most routine plays. Other nations watch us in fear and wonder, wondering what possesses us even as we claim allegiance to the God of Moses and to God's Christ.

If we, as a nation, truly worshipped the Loving Creator of All, then we would have no other gods before God. And yet, when we are pressed to turn from violence, to take appropriate steps to

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reduce the number of murders as so many other countries have done, we put our own pleasure ahead of the needs of the vulnerable. “We have a constitutional right to our guns,” many say and bow down at the altar of their own desires rather than putting first the safety and needs of their neighbor. If the incense burned in garden altars to household deities was a stench in the nostrils of God in the time of Isaiah, how much more the smell of cordite and hot brass rising from The Pulse and Charleston and Sandy Hook and Columbine and all the rest.

Like those Judeans condemned by Isaiah, like the demoniac of Gesara, we have chosen to sleep among the tombs, surrounding ourselves with the bodies of the innocent. We should be rallying our neighbors to insist that our state government overturn the laws that forbid cities from implementing common sense gun safety laws. We should be writing, calling, texting our loved ones in other states to remind them to vote for similar measures in their states and to vote against those politicians who take money from gun manufacturers while mouthing pieties over the mounting hills of corpses. And we should be demanding that our federal government cease the export of all weaponry, including Boeing’s fighters and rockets, and reduce the U.S. military budget in favor of rebuilding our infrastructure, feeding and housing our poor, and educating our children. We need to be on the side of life, not of death.

And when we have emerged from the tombs ourselves, we need to make sure that others are not left to languish there. As I read of the helpless victim of the Legion of demons left by his neighbors to dwell in the tombs without help, I cannot help but think of the lead story in this Friday’s Seattle Times about The Jungle – the area under I-5 south of downtown – and how many of its residents are trapped there. For some, the trap is a result of their own demons, mental illness and addiction, primarily, but these are curable now with time and patience and care. For some, the trap comes because they have no place else to go – housing is too expensive and subsidized housing is denied to those who have any felony on their record, even if they long ago served their time and were rehabilitated. As long as a single one of our neighbors is abandoned to living among those modern tombs, then none of us is truly out of the influence of the demons.

But perhaps above all this morning, I see our culture portrayed in the spirit of self-sufficiency and superiority that infected both Isaiah’s countrymen and Jesus’ trans-lake neighbors. Whether it was in saying, “Come not near to me, for I am holier than thou,” or in asking Jesus to be on his way, because he may have healed that one homeless fellow but he’d sure messed up the profit margin for the local pig owners, those ancient people had proclaimed that they had no need of God’s intervention in their lives. We must look at our nation and at ourselves and ask, are we the ones now saying, “No thanks, God; we’ve got this.” Are we so deluded as to think that we’ve got it made? Do we really think we don’t need God as the deer panting after water? In the discordant noise of our time, can we dance without the music of love?

This was a hard sermon to write. It’s been a hard sermon to deliver. These are hard truths about the country that we love, about our family and friends and neighbors, about us. I know that those of us in this room are committed to love and justice and healing. But these are still things that world needs to hear and as the Body of Christ it is our task to find creative, compelling ways to say them. But there is something else we must say, too. As I was plumbing the depths of the prophet, as I was reflecting on the awful ways in which the Legion of demons still plagues

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humankind, I kept hearing what I think was the voice of God saying, “Don’t forget to tell them that I love them. Don’t forget to tell them that my hands are still outstretched. Don’t forget to tell them that I am ready to heal and to forgive. Don’t forget to tell them that I love them.” And so, I hand on to you that which I received – as you stand for the broken in this world, as you stand for peace and justice, don’t forget to tell those who need admonishment that God loves them, too. Don’t forget to tell them that Jesus can heal them just as he has healed you. Draw them to you with love so that we may stand hand in hand and walk together. For it is together, with God’s help, that we shall overcome Legion and all the demons and all evil. With God’s help, we shall overcome. Amen.