



June 19, 2022 – The Second Sunday after Pentecost
The Reverend Lauren Sayre Lukason
Christ Episcopal Church, Needham, MA

Again and again, this man – someone’s husband, someone’s neighbor, someone’s brother, or son – is overtaken by a destructive force: shackles are violently broken, bonds meant to control him are ripped apart and the man is driven into the wilderness. Every effort made to control him, to control the destructive force within him, fails. Violence erupts, and the cycle begins again.

Like the man in today’s Gospel, we find *ourselves* in combat with a force that we have been unable to control.

In the Gospels, when Jesus healed people who were blind, he improved the situation of the person who had found a way to live with their blindness. When Jesus healed the man who was paralyzed, he sent him home carrying his bed, relieving the man’s four friends who had carried the bed – with the man on it – to Jesus to be healed.

Most of the time, when Jesus cures someone, he improves the situation of a single person – or maybe 5 – regardless, what he is doing is relatively small. There is no doubt that Jesus’ intervention, for that person and perhaps those who witness it, *is* miraculous. It *does* make life better, in a small, localized way. In today’s Gospel story, however, Jesus confronts a force that has proven itself uncontrollable, sporting a consistent record of attacking again, and again, and again.

This day is simply the latest in a long, terrifying series of episodes.

Jesus’ first words of engagement with this force is to ask its name. This was a regular part of exorcism rituals. Since the creation of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, naming of things has been one way in which humans have expressed control over our environment.

We can’t change what we can’t name, the saying goes. In other words, we cannot master or have mastery over that which we do not name.

The man with the demon approaches Jesus and Jesus asks the demon for his name. The demon responds. Jesus does not use the demon’s name when he calls him out of the man. After all, “Legion” is more of a boast than a proper name; it *is*, however, an effective way of saying: “The opponent you [are facing] is big beyond counting, and persistent beyond your patience.”¹ That the name establishes a tie to the vast power of the Roman Empire would not have been lost on the Evangelist Luke’s listeners; nor should it escape our attention.

¹ Richard Swanson. Provoking the Gospel: A Provocation: Fifth Sunday After Pentecost: Luke 8:26-39, June 10, 2016. <https://provokingthegospel.wordpress.com/2016/06/10/a-provocation-fifth-sunday-after-pentecost-luke-826-39/>. Last accessed: June 18, 2022.



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The power of Empire is often keen to be sure those who deign to rise up against it have been reminded that it is a *force of nature*.

And when it comes to nature, there is no recourse; there is no taming it or changing its path.

Except, of course, that we have endless examples of the ways in which nature has been harnessed, shifted, and even controlled.

Empire is not a force of nature. Empire is a force of humanity run amok.

Empire. White Supremacy. Immoral Capitalism. Toxic Gender Norms. Heteronormativity.

These are not forces of nature, but forces of humanity. Systems built by humanity in an attempt to control humanity.

Systems built by those feeling the need to be God, who have forgotten that only God is God.

Systems that bring about a brokenness in our world that lead to the belief that the best solution to a bad guy with a gun is a good guy with a gun. The belief that “there is no problem so severe that it wouldn’t improve if we could just shoot someone.”²

In the Episcopal Church June marks the beginning of what is known as the “the great green growing season”, Ordinary Time, The Season after Pentecost, when paraments – the seasonally colored hangings in the church as well as vestments worn by liturgical leaders – are changed from the blue, purple, white, and gold, to green. Our lectionary transitions from Scripture that tells us The Story of Jesus to selections that center on The Story of The People of God.

It is the month during which we commemorate the anniversary of the Stonewall Uprising of 1969. It is the month in which we celebrate the day on which news of their emancipation reached enslaved African Americans in Texas in 1865.

It is also a month during which we celebrate the recognition of the image of God manifest in them – even if in a too small and incomplete way – and we are called to reflect on the work that has yet to be done.

None of us can be free of the caustic, life-threatening power and ways of Empire until we are *all* free of it – in our thoughts, in our actions, and in our policies.

² Richard Slotkin. *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth Century America*, as quoted in Richard Swanson.



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Sadly, I believe it is only this ongoing pandemic of mass shootings that has made this fact sufficiently personal for some of us who would otherwise be able to survive within the strangling constraints of worldly powers. And yet, there are still those of us who appear to believe that violence regenerates us. This is the legion of demons that possesses us. Politicians continue to put their bids for re-election before the collective good; gun manufacturers defend their profits; idealists of all sorts assert that all that is needed is their own simple solution. At the end of the day, little insight can be found in these clamoring voices.

It is not at all clear that the violence that plagues us is controllable. Its roots run deep in American culture. And even deeper than that: violence reaches out and twists religion to its own ends as well.

The Scriptures of Jewish, Christian, and Muslim faith traditions all contain passages that incite violence. *And* these same Scriptures also dream of a world from which murderous violence is ultimately exorcised. If the incitements in Scripture can be judged to provoke violence, then the dreams of peace *must also* be judged to do the opposite.

So like the Geresene, God calls us to proclaim to those around us – throughout the city – the Good News in following Jesus' Way. And like Elijah, we can be sure that God will provide food for the journey as we wander through deserted areas, remembering what we have left and not knowing where we will end up.

And in the meantime, we wait. We wait for our deliverance. Gay people, trans people, straight people. Black people, Brown people, African and African American people, White people, Asian people, Native American people. Muslims, Christians, Jews. We all wait. It will not be easy. It has not ever been easy, not even after the coming of Christ, Jesus, the Son, our messiah.

Amen.

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