

Sermon
June 19, 2022
Calvary Lutheran Church, Morro Bay
Second Sunday after Pentecost
Luke 8:26-39

This is a Gospel story that most of us are already familiar with. The far side of the lake, Gentile territory, a madman full of a legion of bad spirits, pigs who fly off the cliff (yes, pigs fly here), a healing, an amazed and fearful public, a quick return journey across the Sea of Galilee. This story is in three of the gospels. But in reading it again in preparation for this sermon, I had to say to myself, “What the!?”

I mean, a madman who lives in the cemetery, as if nobody goes there. Jesus’ letting the Legion of demons go into the pigs, in some kind of weird compromise with them, the people streaming into the cemetery like deer caught in the headlights. I was left with the question, What was THAT all about?

Well, after studying, this is the most convincing explanation about it that I could find, informed both by the Bible itself and by a brilliant French-American thinker by the name of Rene Girard. I won’t be saying his name again, but that’s the person.

First, the Bible part. The 16th chapter of Leviticus describes the Day of Atonement in ancient Israel in which the holy sanctuary was cleansed from all the sins of the people. It involves blood and sacrifice, and the climax of the ceremony is that a live goat is presented.

Then Aaron shall lay both his hands on the head of the live goat,
and confess over it all the iniquities of the people of Israel,
and all their transgressions, all their sins,
putting them on the head of the goat,
and sending it away into the wilderness
by means of someone designated for the task.
The goat shall bear on itself all their iniquities to a barren region;
and the goat shall be set free in the wilderness.

You all know what the goat is called, right? The scapegoat. An animal or being or object upon which is loaded the sins of others, so that the balance of the people can feel better about themselves. Oftentimes, in the real world, this process of scapegoating is not ritualistic, but rather casual, brutal and unconscious. It can also be violent, even unto death. Picture lynch mobs. That is what we're talking about.

Scapegoats can and do occur everywhere and at every time, inside and outside of religious contexts, but if you ask people about it, they will mostly say, Oh, that person, that outcast, that unmentionable, THAT person is not a scapegoat. They are simply bad. We had to drive them out. We had to kill them. Are you following me? But which came first, the person being perceived as bad or the driving out of them?

The people of the region on the east side of the Sea of Galilee, the Gerasenes, were living a normal life. They were well acquainted with the madman. He was indeed dangerous, and Lord knows, they tried their best to contain him. Chain him? Tried that. Beat him? Well, he only beats himself. Try to send him away? He takes up residency among the tombs. These are not tombs as we know them today. They are generally reusable tombs, cut into the rock, with benches for decomposing bodies. I'm assuming that the madman slept on one of those benches, among the stench of the latest deceased, as if he himself were as good as dead.

The people say, Yes, he is a madman, but, he is OUR madman! Because he is so crazy, we feel much better about ourselves, being not half as crazy as him. We tell our children to behave, or else the madman is going to get them. This madman, we know who his parents were, we know his story, we put up with him. He is crazy FOR US. We actually brag about him with folks from other towns. In fact, we NEED him to be the madman, for us.

This is the point: the Gerasenes are not so different from people of any age. We have our own outcasts, our own scapegoats, our own undesirables. When Mary and I were seminary interns in the Los Angeles area, we were educated not only about congregational life, but also about urban social life. One day, Pastor Roger Rogahn – at one time an associate pastor at my home congregation in Pasadena – was explaining the development of racial segregation. He first talked about South Central LA, where, historically, black people would live. I should say, were allowed to live. South Central is not very far from downtown, or from any of the wealthy areas of the city. Funny, you would think, that they live so close. Except that the black and other poor people had to be close enough to the wealthy to be able travel easily to them to be their servants, their cooks, their nannies, their gardeners. And of course, South Central became the no-go area for proper people.

It was like the Gerasene cemetery. South Central was known to be filled with violence and danger. I saw the fire from the Watts riots from my safe home in South Pasadena, while I was on my paper route. I was told that the riots had to do with the faulty character of the residents there, not with their troubles and difficulties and suppression. Which comes first, the scapegoating or the violence?

What does Jesus see when he gets off the boat? Immediately the madman. Then he prays for his deliverance from the demons. Then the demons plead with Jesus not to send them to the bottomless pit. No, they implied, You can't send us to the Abyss. We Live Here! They said, Please, send us into those pigs. That way, they might have thought, when the pigs are slaughtered for food, we can go into whoever eats us! It was a desperate ploy, you see.

And I don't know how it started, but one possessed pig started running, and the others, like the proverbial lemmings, followed, right over a cliff into the Sea. I looked this up on, you

know, the internet. And it turns out that pigs are excellent swimmers! Did you know that? But we read in this story that they were all drowned. I can only imagine that the demons were not good swimmers, and they dragged the pigs down with them. Or maybe this story doesn't bear close scrutiny.

But the upshot of the whole matter is that the demons were not subsequently available to find new habitations, new hosts. And if this is truly a scapegoat, or scapepig, story, then the people of the town, who had invested the madman with their sins and failings, they would have felt the drownings keenly, maybe even from far off. It would have been, if you can grasp this, the people's alter-egos that went into the deep. I know that this whole argument is getting deep. But I beg you to continue with me.

The swineherds – we don't use this word much; it's usually sheep-herds – but when they saw what happened, the swineherds ran with fright into town to report the incredible incident. And as a result, an unknown number of townspeople streamed out to see for themselves. And first they saw the madman, now sane and clothed and wondered about how this could be. And then, because of the reasons I've explained, they became very fearful, and, in light of that fact that Jesus had done this disruptive miracle, begged him – not forced him – BEGGED HIM to leave. As our lesson has it, “too much change, too fast.”

The Gerasenes were not in the position to see this freeing of their own demoniac madman as a good thing. In this new reality, they were exposed to consider their own sins, that up until now could be housed, and thus ignored, in someone else. Can you believe it?

The former madman, figuring that he was done with these townspeople, also begged Jesus, to take him along with the disciples. You'd think Jesus would have welcomed another disciple. But what Jesus was wanting now were apostles. Disciples are followers. Apostles

were sent out. “Be my apostle, my friend formerly known as ‘Madman’”, says Jesus. “Tell them the truth, show yourself to be in your right mind, and attribute it all to God.” And the man does as Jesus asks, except for the minor detail that he tells everyone not what God did for him, but what JESUS did for him.

I am taking so long in this sermon to describe what I truly think is going on that I am left with little time to flesh out the consequences for us. But a big one is that, in today’s or any world, when we do not believe in a loving, forgiving, and compassionate God, but rather an uncompromising, vengeful, dangerous one, we are naturally led to the practice of scapegoating. And not only scapegoating an individual, but usually scapegoating a whole people. Think racism, think prejudice in general, think discrimination, fill in the blank.

I’m listening to the January 6th hearings. Actually they’re not hearings as I usually understand, but rather tellings. Tellings of how a whole group of people became convinced that there were very bad people in the world, who were rigging things against them, in this case in a popular election. They did their research and found all kinds of other people online who believed the same way they do. That felt so much better, to think that there was someone ELSE responsible for all their troubles. And heck, if there are so many people saying these things, the accusations must be true. And therefore, violence is justified. For the sake of truth and freedom. Righteous violence. It becomes, or already is, a religious action. Religious in one sense, but definitely not in another.

Lest you might think I’m preaching politics, I’m not. I’m preaching human nature and its connotations. Because I too am tempted to think I am always in the right, when I am not. I’m tempted to believe that in order for me to be good, other people need to be bad. I’m tempted to believe that a certain bodily function of mine has no odor. And here is where the Lord’s Prayer

comes so strongly in the picture, when we pray, “Lead us not into temptation.” Not just what other people tempt me to do, but my own self-temptation. “Let us not judge, lest we be judged.” It is very easy to be possessed by pride and self-justification.

There are problems in the world and society. Inequities, unfairness, trespasses against one another. But this is for sure: If we are not possessed by Jesus, or something akin to Jesus, then we will be possessed by something else. It could be ambition or resentment or woundedness, it could be mob spirit, it could be anger or sorrow or death itself. It could very well be the sins of others, unwillingly given, but eventually willingly received.

Let me also say this: real life, real salvation, real freedom from sin, is always available, for ourselves as well as others. Outcasts can become accepted. Those with heavy burdens can have them lifted. The shunned can become the treasured. The cemetery dweller can move to a new home, full of light and hope and true fellowship. And live to tell the tale. Through the grace of God.

This is my wish for our nation, our world, our neighborhoods, that this new life of good news would continue, gradually or quickly, to claim our whole selves. And that we wouldn't ever be tempted to beg it to leave. Amen.

Rev. Brian Stein-Webber June 18, 2022