



'Conversations with a Savior: *The Demonic*'

Lectionary 12 – Fifth Sunday after Pentecost
8:30 & 10:45 am, June 19, 2016
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Camp Hill, Pennsylvania

[Galatians 3:23-29](#); [Luke 8:26-3](#)

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Too many times. I have stood on this platform just too many times following a local, national, or worldwide tragedy. The Sunday after 9/11. The Sunday following the 2004 tsunami. And the young Amish girls at Nickel Mines. Virginia Tech. Sandy Hook Elementary. The Charleston church shooting. The terrorist attacks in Paris. San Bernardino. The Brussels bombings. And all the little and large violent and frightening events in between.

Every Sunday I stand up here in the aftermath, wishing I had answers. Perhaps some of you come here expecting answers. Or perhaps you are more like me, knowing that much of what any of us could say at times such as this would be meaningless—mere platitudes that are no answer at all, and only trivialize the gravity of these events.

Sometimes on the Sunday after, my sermon has touched upon the horror. Sometimes only the prayers of the church bear witness to the tragedy. Always it never seems to be enough.

Today is yet another "Sunday after" and I stand here again. And since I have no answers, and do not wish to evoke meaningless platitudes, I have to turn to scripture. Holy Scripture, while not without error, and not without the potential for being sadly and badly misinterpreted, will always be the place to turn. Because Holy Scripture bears to you and me a truth that lies within and beyond our broken reality. This truth is, in fact, eternal, and is the story of our God who accompanies us on our journey as we move through despair and onward to hope once more.

I believe today's Holy Scripture has something to say to our anxious minds and heavy hearts. Let me set the scene. Jesus has entered a region where a Jewish teacher might not normally feel very welcome, very safe, or even ought to be visiting in the first place. For our Lord leaves behind the mostly Jewish and familiar area of Galilee, and takes a boat over to the country of the Gerasenes. Luke says it is opposite Galilee. And not just geographically opposite, but religiously opposite, too! This is Gentile territory. A place of pagan religions or no religion at all. If you've heard it from pastors one time you've heard it a thousand times: A good Jew, a religiously-observant Jew, would not typically go and hang around with non-Jews, particularly in a non-Jewish land. Too much risk that the Jew would become ritually unclean. Too much risk that the Jew might get caught up in an alien culture, and their faith diluted and deluded.

It gets worse. In that region, a man practically accosts Jesus—a man who suffers from a legion of demons. (No wonder when asked by Jesus, he calls himself "Legion.") This

man is tormented mentally, emotionally, and physically by these unclean spirits. The townspeople, to protect themselves, have bound and shackled him, though that has not been fail-safe. He's broken through his bonds, and now wanders through graveyard of tombs. So here is someone who dwells among the dead. And that's another location that would be considered unclean to an observant Jew.

So why in the world should Jesus come here?

Unless, as Professor David Lose of Philadelphia Seminary suggests, it is because "there is absolutely nowhere God is not willing to go." (David Lose, "In the Meantime") Yes, Lose says there is no place in his creation that is God-forsaken. That's the first truth that today's Holy Scripture tells us. There is no God-forsaken place. Even among the dead. Even among the marginalized and outcast. Even among the suffering. Even among frightened, judgmental townspeople who look askance and from a distance at the demon-possessed man.

I need to hear that truth—that God is willing to go anywhere and to any lengths to reach you and me. That God never detours around our brokenness to avoid us, but is always entering it more deeply in order to heal and restore us. I need to hear that truth if only to have something, someONE, to whom I can cling who promises never to let me go, no matter where I have gone. SomeONE who loves me unconditionally, and will not stop loving me.

Our Holy Scripture tells us that Jesus cast out the legion of unclean spirits from the man, healing him. The man himself, so full of gratitude, begs Jesus to grant him permission to follow him. To leave the Gerasenes behind and go where Jesus is going. Funny, you would think Jesus would be glad to take on another disciple. "Sure, I'll sign you up!" After all, didn't Jesus say at the beginning of his ministry, "Come and follow me, and I will make you fish for people"? And you totally can't fault the guy from wanting to tag along with this Jesus who was the first compassionate person to approach him in ages, as opposed to his neighbors who kept their distance and felt threatened by him.

Instead, however, Jesus sends him away, back to his homeland, back to his people, with the words, "...declare how much God has done for you."

Which is the second truth we learn from Holy Scripture. That God continues to send us out into the world for his name's sake. Jesus sent this newly-healed demoniac back into his community—where he had recently been feared and shunned, and where it seemed a bit of risk to return—so this man could begin to tell the truth about a God who heals and makes new, who brings life back from the tombs, and who offers compassion to all, no matter who they are.

The truth for us is that's how Jesus is sending **us** out as well.

I've spent time this week reading the stories and staring at the snapshots of those 49 who died in Orlando. I guess I wanted to know them as the human beings they were—yes, perhaps gay or Latino, but also sons and daughters and partners and friends, bankers and baristas, dancers and Disney employees, college students and high school graduates. It's important to know who they are because Jesus always came close to people and always

seemed to know who they were. And it was from his nearness and knowledge of them that his greatest acts of restorative power seemed to emanate.

I've also spent time reading what our bishops in the Lutheran Church have had to say. Not because they had answers. But because they offered to me faithful responses and a plan of action. Both Jim Dunlop, a member here and bishop of our Lower Susquehanna Synod, and Elizabeth Eaton, the bishop of the entire ELCA, issued statements. Both bishops reminded me of how our Lord Jesus continues to send us out.

Jim, in his statement, called our congregations of the Lower Susquehanna Synod to these things:

1. Love your neighbor
2. Reach across dividing lines and listen to and get to know those whom you perceive to be different from you
3. Contact your elected representatives and advocate for legislation that will help to reduce gun violence and affirm the rights of all people
4. Do your part to end the evils of homophobia, racism, xenophobia, intolerance, and violence
5. Work diligently to make our congregations welcoming and safe spaces for all God's children

And Elizabeth, in her statement, called the entire Evangelical Lutheran Church in America to this: "Our work begins now. We need to examine ourselves, individually and as a church, to acknowledge the ways we have divided and have been divided. We must stand with people who have been 'othered.' We must speak peace and reconciliation into the cacophony of hatred and division. We must live the truth that all people are created in God's image."

Too many times I have stood on this platform the Sunday after. It breaks my heart to do so. I do not have answers. But Jesus Christ our Lord has called us to a response. We are to bear Jesus Christ to the world through our own selves—and bring his peace, compassion, healing, and love. **AMEN.**

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