

“The Renewing of the Mind”

Year C Second Sunday after Pentecost June 19, 2022

Galatians 3:23-29 Luke 8:26-39

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In the Hebrew Scripture lectionary passage in 1 Kings 19 the prophet Elijah flees for his life from Ahab and Jezebel. He goes to the wilderness and hides in a cave. God comes, but not in the typical ways one would expect. God comes in the sound of sheer Silence. That’s what finally gets Elijah’s attention. God talks with and listens to Elijah. It’s a recognition of fear and loneliness mixed with the commitment of relationship and a deep desire to do God’s will.

This theme is echoed in Psalm 42 and 43, that says, “As a deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.” This stance of faith is taken even in through the Psalmist’s tears, even depression, as their soul is cast down, “disquieted within” them. Unease is recognized, acknowledged, but also held loosely so something else can be grasped: hope.

In the Galatians passage, Paul describes hope as a quality of trust, leaning one’s life toward God’s promises in Jesus. The word he uses is “faith.” Faith helps us live “justified,” like words on a page that become legible, coherent. Distinctions fall away, and we become free from narrow perspectives.

Which gets us to the story of the demoniac in Luke. It's filled with loads of details that play cultural rules off each other. These details often lead us to the traditional conclusion that Jesus saves us, delivers us from evil, and heals our sin. All these truths have been put into formulas that we can believe. We can agree with them in our mind. But while doing so we can keep Jesus at arms length. But this story isn't about cognitive decisions. The man Jesus confronts is out of his mind and his decisions are not rational. There's more going on here than traditional doctrines or statements of belief can capture. This passage shows us the nature of life itself; it reveals our deepest desires.

That Jesus even traveled to the country of the Gerasene's, opposite Galilee, is an important sign in a couple of ways. It shows that healing extends into the larger world, that justice is meant for all, and love knows no boundaries. It's like Paul's list in Galatians of being so much more than labels, but we are one in Christ. On a more existential level, Jesus embodies the Spirit, the same Spirit who, in the beginning, hovers as Silence over the waters, the deep, dark void, and brings order out of chaos. Here, Jesus floats over the waters in a boat, and as soon as "he stepped out on land, a man of the city who had demons met him." The Spirit's wilderness Silence is met by the tormented man who has wildly suffered a long time. He shouted at the top of his voice."

Jesus engages in conversation with “Legion,” the name mentioned to describe many demons this man struggles with in this scene. “They begged Jesus not to order them to go back into the abyss.” Let’s play with that for a minute. The demons don’t want to go back into the abyss.

Traditional Christianity has developed the assumption that hell is a place of eternal torment. Traditional religion calls God “holy,” and defines this as “the separate one.” God is holy, separate, and hell is totally devoid of God’s presence, that’s what makes the separation unbearable. On Earth, our existence is more tolerable when we have Jesus in our life because he is the bridge over the gap created by sin. This is what most Christian churches teach.

In this scene in Luke, that traditional imagination may picture demons getting sent back to hell. Maybe they like living in this man where they can wreak havoc, but in the abyss of hell, they are in agony, so they don’t want to go there. It’s like they’re taking a break from the intensity of the abyss.

But let’s step back from that a minute. What if the abyss is not hell? What if demons are most tormented by connection rather than separation? Jewish faith has long described the number one sin as assuming you are separate from God. There is no separation. There is complexity, there are perspectives that may feel like separation, we do suffer, but Objective reality

involves connection, and has pervasive goodness. Christian mystics have long described God's love and presence as an abyss because these have no end. Faith is the gift to see the abyss and not be afraid because as one falls into it, one is held by it.

A few years ago, I visited Glacier Camp on Flathead Lake in Montana as that presbytery, Glacier Presbytery, hosted a series of presentations by seminary professors. One of them was Wendy Farley, and she now directs the program in Christian spirituality at the Graduate School of Theology, University of Redlands in California. In a [recent article](#) [linked] in The Christian Century magazine, she's interviewed by Amy Frykholm about the 13th-Century contemplative who lived in what is today Germany. Back in the 1200's, Mechthild of Magdeburg was a beguine. The "beguines were a group of lay women [...] who did not want to become nuns and did not want to live the married life. Farley says, "They were like many women and men today who are searching for a contemplative way of life. Maybe they find a small community, maybe a study group. They do some meditation on their own. They may work in the world. They may live in community together. The beguines were dedicated to a life of prayer and service." Farley says, "I find in them a kind of kindred spirit because there are so many people now who are

searching for a rich spirituality and are having trouble finding it. And they're great models for, "if you can't find it, then create it."

One quote they put focus on from Mechthild is this: "Belief can be governed by authority structures. Desire is different." She had "a consuming desire for relationship with God. [...] her whole life was this pursuit of her divine beloved."

Elijah, the Psalmist, Paul, the Gerasene demoniac. Today we come alongside a long line of mystics who seek more than law, more than external doctrines and structures, they cannot be controlled by the party line because they experience something more formative. Contemplative faith, mystical experience, the depths of love. These gifts of God transform our heart and renew our minds.

In the week ahead, take time to picture yourself at the feet of Jesus, clothed and in your right mind. Justified by faith, trust in the Spirit's work to help you through suffering to claim God's ongoing Presence. Practice spiritual disciplines like prayer to silence other voices and distractions. Then put your faith to action to share how much God has done for you. As we live for the mission of Christ, deep peace is given, now and forever. Amen.